

THE DRACULA HORROR SERIES #8

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Dracula's Disciple

After six thousand years in the land of the dead, the heinous Herak is back—for the blood of the earth!

by Robert Lory



97

**Aaaa nerau sexem sexemu. Tak peha hert ent
heh set hesiu . . .**

The pool of blood coagulates, boils in upon itself, its maze of thin-substance tendrils rearranging themselves at the command of the words of control. They heat, they cool, they rise, they fall, all to the dictates of the patterns, at the command of the One who knows the words, the One who knows the power.

**Samaa em xu, sepsi ager nu Neterzert para
henasen er maa neferuk . . .**

Soon now the pool of red-black would calm itself, himself. Soon now Herak would spy out of its placid surface, just as he had six thousand years ago. Yes, soon Herak would again face the Master, ruler of the living dead . . . and this time Herak would win.

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Dracula's Disciple

by Robert Lory

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DRACULA'S DISCIPLE

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*He is not the monster Apef.
He works to slay the monster Apef.
Yet there is something of Apef within him
And of other dark beings who would work
us harm.
He speaks of Apef and those others,
Yet we see them not.
And we join him in his work
So as to avoid the wrath of the monster that we
do see.
Him.*

*From A Tentative Translation
of the Apef Bronze, co-authored
by Ismail Tarraf and Alexandru
Thorka. Unpublished.*

CHAPTER 1

Professor Ismail Tarraf wiped his brow with a handkerchief he discovered to be already soaked. Sighing he returned the wide-brimmed khaki hat to his head. The sweat droplets streaking the inside of his dark sunglasses would have to wait. All he would accomplish by attempting to clean the lenses now would be a redistribution of moisture which would soon be replenished from the water the noonday sun was taking rapidly from his system.

He was a lean man, almost laughable in his khaki shorts and shirt which had been neatly pressed this very morning when they were taken from the foot locker inside his tent. Standing on the dune, looking down at the slow progress of his workers, Tarraf seemed as old as the pyramids themselves, his deeply creased face weathered as if from centuries of erosion—like the face of the mighty Sphinx.

Egypt. Once the mightiest of empires, once the citadel of human knowledge, once the stronghold of kings and priests and builders—builders of a kind the world has not known since and may never know again.

Egypt. Professor Ismail Tarraf's homeland. And

his love. Let the sun and sand and the desolation of such lonely places as that he now looked upon—let them pummel him with all their strength! He would remain tall, he would remain at his work, the same work which had already brought him a modicum of fame in his own land and in other lands. Just among a very few scholars, of course. Those who called themselves Egyptologists, who loved this land and its mysteries almost as much as did he himself.

Almost. None had his attachment, an almost—more than almost—romantic involvement with the Egypt which had been. And now . . .

Now.

If the old writings were correct, and if he had interpreted them correctly.

They spoke of a place. Several scholars had discussed the place in learned journals, but most of them maintained that it was mystical in nature. Meaning it was not a real place.

The place of Apef.

There were not so many mentions of the place in the old writings, but there were many mentions of Apef—or Apep. Or the other names by which the monster was known. Not a god. *Monster*. Or monster-god, if you like.

Tarraf had not made up his mind about the nature of the creature, but he had made up his mind that the place mentioned was in fact a *real place*. And so he had assembled this expedition. It was not well staffed or well financed, nor was it smiled upon by those he had thought would be more open-minded—if not open-handed with funds for his kind of scholarship. At one point he considered giving up the whole idea. He

had known that the argument he'd had with a noble guardian of the funds he needed would be his last argument, but his own words then had convinced him that he must make the attempt. And even now, in this sweltering heat, his words came back to him.

"It must be there! Here—" His trembling finger pointing to the place on the map to the west of Idfu, some hundred miles west of that town on the Nile. "All the directions point to this area!"

The man with the black suit and the neat white gloves had rubbed his neat white gloves together. "Professor, there is nothing there—nothing. The sands of time have been there throughout the age of our country's greatness and the aftermath of that greatness. Bones of lost armies from many epochs and many nations—those you may find under the sand, but that is all. It is too distant from the river of life to have supported anything like a major city."

"I did not say it was a major city," Tarraf had countered. "I said it was the place of Apef!"

"Apef lived by himself, then?" A conciliatory smile.

A determined scowl. "No, my good sir. He needed other life around him—for the times when he felt himself hungry. It's my understanding he especially enjoyed devouring the wealthy, the tightfisted—and the intransigently stupid!"

Thinking back to his words of months ago, Tarraf smiled to himself and gazed down from where he stood upon the dune. He could see the slow pace of his young workers, but even that didn't bother him, not this afternoon, not right now as he looked down upon the dig they had begun

the previous week. For, although progress was slow, he knew.

He had found the place of Apef.

The place of the Serpent.

The Devil.

The Bloodletter.

A real monster?

Tarraf laughed. He did not believe in monsters. But he did believe that there was something in this remote place. Something which, thousands of years ago, so impressed those who heard of it—or perhaps saw it with their own eyes—that the legend of Apef was born. A man, perhaps. Except . . . what man would choose to live out here, far away from the nearest village of what was then the civilized world? *Choose*. Perhaps that was the operative word. It just might be that most of the inhabitants had no choice. Slaves, perhaps, or their equivalent. Perhaps held in sway by one man so strong, so diabolic, that once they were lured to the spot they dared not leave. Perhaps. Cities have been built in other parts of the world with no more motivation than that—the desire to stay alive.

But now . . .

All who once had lived here were dead. Ironic. We fight so hard to spend but the wink of an eye upon the surface of this planet. We, the human species. How much harder must a god fight—to retain his immortality?

But, then, what did an Egyptology professor know of gods?

He chuckled to himself. More than most people, more than most! And here—

His eyes took in the six white tents which had

been set up more than a week ago, then they focused upon the seven men and five women who worked under the scorching sun. Slaves? Was he some kind of modern day Apef overseeing the slaves' toil? Hardly. It was a different age by far. The only reason these young men and women were here was the laurels that working with the distinguished Professor Ismail Tarraf would bring them. The pay was close enough to nothing to be that in fact. But the weeks they worked here would look well on a resume when, in the near future, they applied to some university or other as young experts in their field. And if by chance the old man wasn't batty, and if he was *right* . . . Well, that would be a chance in a million, but how great *that* would look on the resume. *Associate of Professor Ismail Tarraf during his well-known find of the Place of Apef.* Privately, of course, each of the students would confide that it was he or she who pointed out the exact spot to begin the first digging. "You know the professor is a bit on in years, and well, you know . . ."

He smiled, then the smile disappeared. Abruptly.

"Hey—stop that! *Wait!* I'll be right down!"

The excitement in his voice was caused by what he had heard. One of the young men—his name was Hashim and he was a brute of a young man physically, although his personality seemed like that of a lamb—had brought the end of his shovel down hard. Too hard for an archaeological dig. But young people the world over seem to lack the patience of their elders, and, thinking this over as he had many times in the past, Professor Tarraf wondered whether the patient science of

archaeology was in its death throes. "The thumbs and shovels of the impatient and blundering innocent shall destroy the buried past." Who was it who said that? Ah yes, the old Romanian. A genius, one who could well appreciate—

"I said *stop that!*" he bleated, sounding to himself like some wounded sheep. But the blasted boy was still scraping the metal of his shovel against—

Metal.

And the gods knew just how many delicately engraved inscriptions that shovel point was reducing to oblivion!

Docilely, the young man surrendered his tool to the puffing man in charge. "I'm, er, sorry, sir. I just—"

"You just wanted to make your mark upon the ancient world?"

"No sir. I just thought that—"

"No. You did *not* think! Look around you—look at the structures we have uncovered so far. What do you see?"

The young man named Hashim looked. "It's a town of some size, by its looks. The hieroglyphics we've uncovered so far—"

"Excellent! Speak of them—in that every night since we've discovered the first of them we've done little else but discuss them. *Speak!*"

The young man seemed to jump. "Well—er, sir—they are different."

"And how are they different?" Tarraf's voice had again become low-key. Patience. It was more than a virtue. When dealing with today's youth, it was a herculean task!

"Odd things, sir. Signs which are not readily familiar—"

"They are not familiar at all. Isn't that what you meant?"

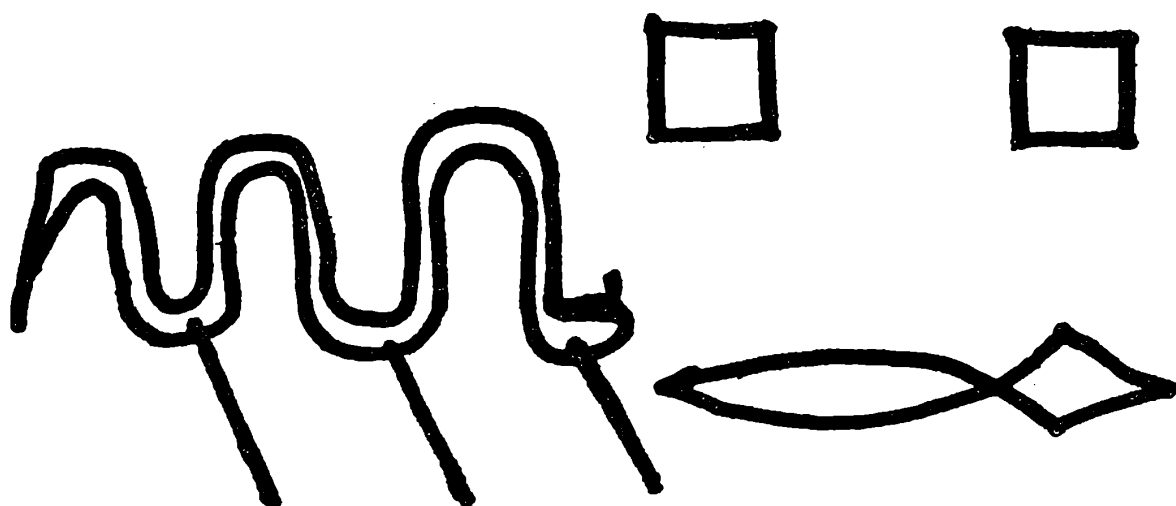
Hashim looked uncomfortable. "What I mean, sir, is that they are not familiar to us." He looked at his companions for some support. From the slits under his eyelids, the professor also looked. Only one of them—a girl, Samiha was her name—nodded slightly. The import of what Hashim was saying was quite obvious to the old man. They, as students, could not be expected to know everything, every symbol which had been transcribed, identified, and yielded to translation. But he—Tarraf the professor—should be up on the very latest findings in his field. What was being said, in short, was that at least one of them had his doubts about the old man's grasp of what was current in his field. He sighed.

"Very well. They are not familiar to us. Such being the case, we would not want to destroy the opportunity for others, perhaps more knowledgeable than we, to view them. Is that not correct, Hashim?" He did not wait for a response but moved to his hands and knees to get a closer look at the thing which the young man's shovel had struck. His fingers began to move the hard-packed sand from the thing, then they stopped. His tone was flat, not at all indicative of the excitement he was feeling inside.

"Well—are there no other hands among us?"

As the group of young archaeologists knelt to assist Tarraf stood up and looked down at what his own hands had uncovered. "Amazing," he said, hardly breathing. The writing on the metal plate

was as clear as if it had been etched there the day before. It was ironic—the first symbol that met his eyes was one he had hoped to find here, yet he hardly believed he was seeing it.



The sign of Apef.

The sign that had never ceased to thrill him whenever he'd seen it after he had begun to plan this expedition. The serpent of death, the two squares—or holes, like those a snakebite might leave in its victim. And more: The blades set into the body of the snake, the only method by which he could be killed. This was an unusual combination, but it *was* a sign of Apef, he was certain of it.

But, as the uncovering of the bronze plate continued, that was the only thing he was certain of. The other signs . . .

They had elements in common with the hieroglyphics Tarraf knew so well, but there were so many variations—new elements as well as new combinations.

New?

No, Tarraf decided. There were techniques to discern the relative ages of things, but Tarraf

knew, deep down, that the writing which he gazed upon was older than that with which he was familiar. Perhaps far older. There was something else about the writing, too. Perhaps it had something to do with its relationship to the dark monster of early Egyptian myth . . . But as Tarraf watched more and more of the bronze plate emerge into the sunlight, it was as if a cloud of darkness itself seemed to be gathering in the desert air around the dig.

Which was, of course, impossible. Yet he looked away from the plate to be sure. No, the sun still burned high in its clear sky, the heat still steamed from the sands—and the perspiration still soaked his body. But somehow even the droplets of sweat had turned cold.

Imagination, surely. The excitement of the find, its strangeness. Surely—

“Professor!”

It was one of the girls. Samiha. “Please, Professor—come look at this!”

He did not have to move to see, but he did anyway. The girl had reached the end of where the bronze plate lay in the sand. It ended in a sharp jagged line, like a clean bolt of lightning. It was one of the young men—a moody youth named Mahmoud—who spoke next.

“There has to be more to the plate,” he said. “It looks as if it must have been broken at the time of the disaster. You see how clean the broken edge is?”

“Uncover it in its entirety,” the professor directed. As the group again set about the work, the old Egyptologist felt a strange chill run down his backbone. The disaster. It was a popular theory

among some of the younger people at the universities. It seemed always to be popular among the young for as long as he could remember. The theory was simple enough, holding that no city, no community, would disappear unless some kind of disaster were responsible—a flood or earthquake, a great fire, a famine or epidemic or total defeat by an invading army. In its simplicity the theory was not all that bad, except there were instances when it was difficult to apply. There were cases when entire communities of people simply seemed to pick up and leave their dwelling places for no discernible reason. Yet, even in these cases, the proponents of the disaster theory would have their arguments:

“It could be that the wells suddenly went dry—or that bad omens indicated that the gods no longer smiled upon the community. Both of these cases could be classified as a disaster. Just because we cannot say with accuracy exactly what the *nature* of the disaster was, does not mean—”

In any case, scholars as old as Tarraf, men who had been in the field as long as he, rarely argued the point with the younger men. The drive for simple explanations, the quest for the one single theory which would explain all data, this was part of what it was to be young. When one learned more, one knew that there were really no simple explanations, and those scholars who were not totally disillusioned went on, some of them, to make real contributions to their fields.

“It’s beautifull!” the girl, Samiha, said.

That was a statement with which the old scholar could not disagree. The plate was completely uncovered now, its metallic surface gleaming in

the sun. Its thickness was about three inches. Originally, its shape had been rectangular. From the way its left side had been damaged, it appeared that the plate's overall measurements had been some five feet by three. The top left corner still was intact. It was a treasure of a find, there was no doubt about it—only the small portion of the plate was missing, and perhaps even that would be found nearby. Perhaps if they moved the plate—

He reached down and gripped the edges. "Here help me lift—" But even before he had completed his request, their hands were assisting him. The plaque was strangely light, as if it were not bronze throughout but some sort of alloy—a modern alloy. In any case, the movement of the plate took each of them by surprise.

So did the space beneath it—and what was within that space.

"Don't move!" a voice directly behind Tarraf commanded. The young man, whoever he was, was right. Those who stood nearest the enclosure dared not move. The chill returned to Tarraf's back as he stood, still holding the edge of the plate, listening to the hammer of a revolver cock back.

From his right rear two shots sounded.

The large horned asp took one of them through the head.

When the plate was set down, the diggers returned to look at the snake. Tarraf congratulated the young man on his shooting skill and upon his foresight in having worn his pistol. Each of them had such a weapon, for just such emergencies as this one. The desert was not always a

kind host—far from it—yet the archaeologist, unlike the nomads who have dwelt among the sands since the beginning of time, sometimes forgot the swiftness with which death might pay a visit. It had been fortunate, indeed, that Bubaker—the only one of them who was wearing his pistol—had not been engaged in lifting the plate. Otherwise the poison of the asp's fangs even now would be mixing with the life juices in one of their party.

"Unusual," the young woman named Samiha said.

"The snake?" Tarraf asked. "Not at all." And it wasn't. In his years of field work, he had seen them in more unusual places. Once in particular, when a colleague of his thrust his hand into a beautifully preserved pot, he found his lower arm encircled by a particularly tenacious viper. No, the presence of the snake here was not unusual, but it seemed the girl was not speaking of the snake.

"A sound—from one of Bubaker's bullets," she was saying. "There in the hole. It was as if the bullet were striking something else of metal."

"Be careful!" Tarraf cautioned as two of the young men—Mahmoud and Hashim—jumped into the pit. Hashim looked up at him questioningly. It was obvious that there was nothing more down there, nothing of danger at least. The sun clearly showed nothing but sand. Still, the old scholar had the uncomfortable feeling that something . . . something dark . . .

He shrugged off the feeling. "I meant that you should be careful in trying to locate whatever it was Samiha thought she heard. Excitement has

caused many an important relic to be damaged by improper handling."

Hashim nodded and turned down to where Mahmoud already was picking away at the hard crusted sand. "I think—yes!" Mahmoud cried. "Here!"

As the object Mahmoud had found was uncovered, there was a blaze of golden light from which Tarraf had to turn his head. The sun's reflection upon whatever it was—

It was a brilliantly fashioned golden bowl, Tarraf saw when Hashim took it from Mahmoud. Mahmoud himself was continuing with his work. "Something else down here," he muttered. But for the moment all eyes were on the object which Hashim held, all heads craning to see the wonderfully preserved thing. It was about a foot and a half in diameter. Its exterior surface held strange symbols, but it was the interior of the bowl which caused the group to marvel. It was highly polished and flawless. Not even the slightest of scratches appeared on its gently sloping hollow-ness. Professor Tarraf had never seen anything like it—in form or in its state of preservation. To have rested beneath the sands for who knows how long . . . and to carry not a sign of damage . . .

"I've got it!" Mahmoud shouted, pulling something free from its hold in the crust and rising. For an instant, Tarraf was amused by the young man. The boy had finally come out of his sullen shell, he was genuinely excited—too excited.

"Be careful, Mahmoud!"

But the warning was too late. The thing which Mahmoud had unearthed was some kind of stoneware, dark red in color and shaped like a

beaker, no larger than a modern quart container. There were symbols on the sides of the object which, like the golden bowl, seemed perfectly preserved. At least, it did—until Mahmoud stumbled—

And dropped it.

With a cry of grief, Mahmoud fell to his knees, his hands reaching out toward the broken shards. It was just as the fingers of his right hand touched the nearest of the pieces that it happened.

It could have been some kind of trick of the eyesight, not unusual in the burning desert at high noon, but it was seen by more than just one of them. Again that would not be unusual, not in the desert. But it seemed . . . what *appeared* to have happened . . .

It was a kind of mist, a light gas with a bluish tint to it. It came from where the broken beaker lay, seeming at first to spiral upward but then rapidly changing its course—directly toward the face of Mahmoud. Directly toward his nostrils. Then it was gone.

It had all happened swiftly, much more swiftly than the process takes to describe. Perhaps no one would have thought much of it, perhaps no one would have even commented upon what his eyes saw but his brain could not but dismiss as an illusion of some kind. And no one did comment upon it, not at the moment. Everyone was too busy watching Mahmoud—

And the sudden change which had come over him.

His limbs suddenly stiffened. Then, with his head lifting and his eyes looking wildly about him, he shot to his feet. It was as if he did not

know where he was, as if he knew none of the people standing around him. Then his eyes stopped moving. They focused upon Hashim—and upon the golden bowl Hashim still held.

With an unintelligible scream Mahmoud lunged, his momentum carrying Hashim to the ground beneath him, his fingers, those of both hands, lacing tightly around Hashim's throat.

And now it was Samiha who was screaming. "Stop, Mahmoud—stop!" Then to the others: "Please, won't someone stop him?"

Someone tried, two someones—two strapping youths the size of Hashim who himself must have outweighed the crazed Mahmoud by twenty pounds. The first young man who moved in found Mahmoud's fierce eyes on his face and a swift fist bottom to the side of his head. He went down in a slump, just as the second young man caught a foot in the stomach and doubled over retching. Hashim tried to pull himself up, but to no avail. With another burst of strange words, Mahmoud again fell upon him, his fingers again finding Hashim's throat.

It was then that Samiha ran to the boy who had killed the snake earlier. He stood stunned, staring down into the pit where the two men struggled, and then at the girl who had pulled his pistol from its holster at his hip.

"Samihal!" Professor Tarraf cried. "No—don't—"

But it was too late. She had already taken a two-handed bead on Mahmoud's back. The report echoed as if from the sky itself. Mahmoud pushed himself up from the choking, gasping form of Hashim, his hands trying to reach around to

the hole in his back from which the blood was already beginning to flow. He turned upward, looking at the girl with hatred and curiosity, his face a picture of pure rage. It was when his eyes focused on the smoking weapon in her hand that he pointed—straight at its barrel.

Then he spoke. Softly this time, as if he had seen something of wonder. But there was no understanding of what he said, because it was a language not one of them recognized. Then suddenly, a hacking noise came from his throat. His eyes stared back around wildly—at Hashim who still held the golden bowl—and then he dropped to his knees and fell face forward into the sand. As he did so, Hashim moved to help the dying young man, bending his face close to Mahmoud's.

Then unnoticed by any of those who watched, the bluish mist came from the nostrils of Mahmoud—and into those of the young man with the golden bowl.

Suddenly Hashim straightened, his eyes brightening into a fiery red for an instant. Then he was still.

It was Samiha, running down to him, who spoke first. "Are you all right?"

He did not answer, and his eyes fixed upon the pistol she held in her hand. Following his gaze, she dropped the revolver onto the sand. Realizing for the first time what she had done, she clung to Hashim, her body shuddering with sobs that cut through the steaming shroud of air enveloping them all.

Then one of the other girls screamed.

Samiha's eyes turned from Hashim and followed his gaze to where Mahmoud lay.

Or what had been Mahmoud. Something was happening to his body. It seemed to be—

Shriveling, Samiha thought with a gasp.

Not in size, not exactly. It was as if the flesh was contracting tightly, shrinking around the bone structure it covered. It was happening quickly, the substance of the skin yellowing, becoming thin—almost transparent—like a wispy spider web. Then suddenly it hardened.

It was as if the exterior cover of Mahmoud's body had turned into petrified papyrus.

Samiha turned her face into Hashim's chest and another of the girls screamed. Snapping himself to action, Professor Tarraf took charge.

He ordered the women to their tents. "At once, all of you. You, Hashim—take the bowl to the artifact tent." It was almost business as usual, Tarraf shouting all of them about, telling one to be sure to gather all of the pieces of the broken red beaker, telling four of the men to carry the bronze plate to the tent which housed their finds. There was only one discordant note. "Leave Mahmoud where he lies. I will radio for the authorities. In the meantime, all work shall cease here—but no one shall leave the camp. Is that understood?"

Each of them said that it was. Each of them except Hashim, who still appeared to be in a state of shock.

Natural, yes, thought the old scholar. Natural. But Mahmoud's behavior had been completely *unnatural*. In some way, somehow, they had done something to this place—

The Place of Apef—

Had they released something from the darkness?

He shuddered, yet he thought he owed these young people some kind of explanation. He said it short, swift, and to the point:

“There is a *presence* here. Without trying to sound melodramatic, I think we all should recognize that—and recognize also that, in our activities here today, we may have arranged for our own deaths. It may be that all of us are dead men—and women—from some unknown plague which we have unwittingly released.”

As to Professor Tarraf’s specifics, he was very wrong. But in a general sense, he could not have been more right.

CHAPTER 2

Night. A cloudless night. A bright eleven o'clock moon.

The stars in their primeval wisdom, shining down in full light upon the earth below—for those who have the eyes to see, for those who will turn their faces upward from the piddling doings of man and see the universe above.

The face of one was so turned. As he sat, some ways from the camp, the young man whose name was Hashim wore an expression of awe. In the beginning there had been confusion, then something close to shock. Then, slowly, he had begun to understand . . .

It was impossible, but it had happened.

It had happened.

Lost in his thoughts, he did not hear the foot-falls which even now were approaching him. It was the girl, Samiha. She had looked for him within the area of the tents, and on the advice of the professor had come out in this direction. "Be careful," she was warned by the man who was even more mystified now that there were other authorities within the camp and he was attempting to explain to them what had happened. All of the party were supposed to remain in the

camp area, Samiha knew, but the professor's concern was not that one of them might be breaking the law by leaving.

"Be very careful," he urged again. "This—this something which now stalks the sands—it has struck by day, but its realm is the night." And then, suddenly, the old man seemed to brighten. "The night. Yes, there is one who might—who just might be of assistance. . . ."

Samiha listened patiently while Professor Tarraf spoke of the man who might be able to help unravel the puzzle. "If . . . if he would come," the professor mused. "But of course he would come. A mystery such as this—it would put him on the very next airplane. I must get a message to him at once."

And the old man, still muttering to himself, strode toward the tent which held the radio equipment, leaving Samiha to her own devices. For a moment she stood looking out at the dunes surrounding the camp. So quiet out there. There was a presence lurking, she knew that for a fact, but it was more than the thing, whatever it was, that had been unleashed that afternoon. It was the desert itself. That always had been present, the contours of its sands shifting imperceptibly with the passing years. Even when the shifts took place with the suddenness of desert storms, always there was the settling aftermath, the calm. The quiet.

She had felt it from the beginning, this sense of foreboding. The brooding dunes, watching with disdain the insignificant activities of the insignificant invaders of its realm. *Its realm is the night.* Professor Tarraf had said that of the

new and unknown thing which had killed Mahmoud. But it was as true of the desert as well. Under the bright lights of the heavens, it came into its own full power. Perhaps she should not wander from the tents, perhaps she should remain with the others where there was some measure of safety—

No. The thought of safety brought back the mental image of the dead Mahmoud. He had been far from alone when the horror struck. And now Hashim—

He was out there somewhere. He was alone, no doubt trying to accept the fact of Mahmoud's death and his attack on Hashim, his friend, before that death, a death she had caused. He was out there, brooding silently in the folds of the silently brooding dunes. . . .

He did not turn as she spoke his name. He seemed not to react at all as she sat at a place some four to five feet to his right. Yet, she knew that he was aware of her being there. She started twice to speak, each time thinking better of it. No, he would talk when he felt like talking. When he needed her to comfort him, she would do so. His burdens were great enough without her adding to them by forcing conversation.

Still, it was not good for him to sit here in silence, his eyes strangely focused upon the stars—

“You do not know of the blood stealer, do you?”

She jumped to her feet as if she had been yanked up by the hair. The question itself was strange enough. But stranger still was the fact that Hashim's lips did not seem to have moved. His face remained upturned toward the sky.

"Answer my question."

"I—blood stealer?" It was all she could manage. His lips were not moving. He still didn't look at her. She was hearing his words, not with her ears, but somewhere in the back of her brain!

"The blood stealer. The one whose place you have unearthed. You and the others—you know nothing of the one who dwelt within the ruins you have violated?"

"N-no, but—Hashim, *how are you doing this?*"

"None of you can read the symbols, is that not true?"

"Hashim—"

"*Answer!*"

The single word crashed through her skull like a clap of thunder. There was a commanding sense of urgency, and just enough of a touch of menace to drive out the other concerns in her mind.

"No. You know that we cannot read them, not even the professor, although he says that one of the signs refers to Apef—"

And now Hashim's face did change expression, his lips did part. Although his eyes remained skyward, his mouth opened.

He laughed.

"Apef! So Apef is known still, but he alone. The others remain hidden from the memories of man, buried in their legends, hidden behind symbols that no man can read!"

"There is a man—at least, Professor Tarraf says—"

"Who?"

"Professor Tarraf."

"No, the other. The one he is asking to come."

"How did you know—" But then she stopped.

She knew that somehow Hashim was reading her mind—but if he could read her mind, why did he have to ask—

“Because I am not yet in full command of my power,” he explained in his non-oral voice, which the girl now recognized to be almost completely flat. No kind of inflection, no movement, as though a machine were doing the talking—

“You will tell me of the Romanian.”

“But that is all I really know,” she protested. “An old colleague of Professor Tarraf. The professor said he likes mysteries, that he knows of dark things. Hashim—I must know how you are doing this. What has happened to you which makes you so distant, so—so cold?”

And now his eyes turned from the stars and looked into hers. “Cold? Yes, I am cold—so very cold.”

The way the words came into her mind made the girl shudder. But this was the man she loved, and he needed her. She stepped toward him hesitantly, not sure he wanted her to approach. There seemed to be some kind of barrier between them—not just the barrier of their present mode of conversation, but some kind of invisible but material wall which separated them. Yet, as she took another step toward where he now also was standing, he did not seem to object. In fact, he was smiling.

A strange smile.

But was not the entire night strange? And did not the strangeness begin long before the night fell?

“Hashim—” she said softly, her arms reaching out toward this young man she loved. There were

to be words of endearment to follow, but she could not say them. Her eyes went from the strange smile to something which seemed to flash in the light of the bright night.

It was a knife which Hashim held in his right hand.

His left hand now closed on her wrist like a vise.

"Hashim—no! Please!"

"You are correct. I do have need of you."

Her mind was stunned now, as if she had been physically struck. For, at the same instant that the mental message echoed in her brain, her ears picked up the sounds which came from his lips. They were words, but words which she didn't recognize, words she'd never heard before. Except that she had heard them once. From the lips of Mahmoud when he had attacked Hashim—

"Please, no—I—"

But there was something in his face which told her what he was going to do—at least the first part of it—and she knew that there was no tenderness, no love, no mercy, in the man she had come out into the night to comfort. *Its realm is the night.* That was the horrible thought which entered her mind an instant before the sharp tip of the knife plunged into her throat. She tried to scream, but she was choking on her own blood. She felt herself falling, but only for a moment. He was holding her up, holding her while his face moved downward as if to kiss her lips. But it was not her mouth he was seeking.

She screamed silently as she felt the knife withdraw from her throat and felt his lips cover the wound.

It was the last thing she was ever to feel on this earth.

The young man whose name was Hashim stepped back from where the sands now covered the body of the girl, his eyes satisfied that she would not be found immediately.

Satisfied?

No, he was not satisfied. He was far from satisfied. The blood—the blood of the girl—still was on his lips, its acrid taste bringing back in full the memories of the one he hated. The blood stealer. He himself was no stealer of blood, not in the same sense as the other. He had tried to acquire a taste for the fluid of life, but even now he had had to force himself to swallow it. Yet the blood had worked a bit of its magic within his body.

His body.

Yes, this body now was his. And this blood—

Carefully, he placed the vial of the blood into the right front pocket of his trousers. He had brought the small glass vial with him this night, knowing that sooner or later the girl would follow. His real reason for killing her was to fill the vial, for there were other uses for blood, uses other than the mere sustenance of one's body. For some of them, this blood would be useful. For others—for the real task—it would not suffice.

The blood in the vial was tainted. The girl and—and Hashim. They had been lovers.

But there was always a goodly quantity of blood to be found. Wherever there were humans, there was a ready-made storage vessel. All that was needed was to take the fluid from its place of storage. It mattered little that the inventory was con-

tained in a warehouse which was a breathing and thinking being. What mattered was availability.

And, of course, suitability.

This blood he had extracted this night was not fully suitable—not for the real work. But there were uses—at least one use—to which it would be put tonight.

Again, as he had done so many times this night, he looked at the stars overhead. It was impossible, but it was true. The sky—so strange. The sky he had known as one knows the palm of his own hand . . .

He looked down at his hand, a cruel smile forming on his lips. Here was a hand he did not know at all. It was fitting, he supposed. Strange hand, strange body—under strange star formations.

And in a land where the spoken language was strange, a dangerous land because of that very fact. Eventually he would learn the odd tongues of this world, in fact he was sure he could do so rather swiftly. They seemed not to be complicated at all. But for the present, he must hide from these people. If this man Thorka . . .

Alexandru Thorka. A Romanian. From the country Romania which, in the girl's addled mind—made clearer through his tasting of her blood—she placed to the east above the Middle Sea. Tarraf seemed to think that this Thorka might be able to decipher the language of the bronze plate. Was that a threat, a real threat to the work he had before him?

He did not know. In any case, he could not begin immediately. His equipment, all of it ruined when *he*—

No, not all of it. There were things in the storage tent which the ant-like diggers already had unearthed. Now that the place had drawn official attention, the digging would go much faster—there was a mystery to be solved. And the golden bowl. Miraculously, that had come through everything without a single scratch on its mirror finish.

The bowl. He must have it in his possession at once. That and the other things.

His approach to the camp was silent and unseen. His extrasensory ability allowed him to avoid crossing the paths of any of the several people who moved about the tents. Within an hour he had taken the bowl and other items of equipment from the artifacts tent. Five minutes later, he was in another tent, kneeling on one knee before a canvas cot.

On the cot was the skin-shriveled body of a dead man.

Mahmoud.

The coarseness of the petrified skin made Hashim scowl. It would always be thus, he imagined. He had never seen this before, but then he had not seen what had happened to his own body. He supposed it might have met the same fate, although—within the darkness of that red bottle—

He'd wanted the shards of that bottle. But those were in the hands of the officials Tarraf had called in. The mystery had begun with that bottle, and their fragments were viewed as being important evidence. No matter, not for now. He would get the pieces back—and make sure they were destroyed properly. In the meantime, there was no harm in allowing them to remain in the

hands of those who knew nothing of what they had held. Now that the bottle was no more than shards...

Of course, there was one who could, if he gained possession of those pieces—

But, no. That would not happen. *He* no longer dwelt in this place.

The blood stealer.

Enough of thoughts. There would be ample time for thinking and planning later. As for now...

Still kneeling by the side of the cot, he extracted from his pocket the vial of blood. Carefully, he opened the top, then he placed the tip of the index finger of his right hand over the opening, upending the vial. When he was satisfied with the amount of blood covering the index finger, he repeated the process with the finger next to it. Then, replacing the cap on the vial and placing that back into his pocket, he moved both blood-laden fingers toward the face of the dead Mahmoud...

And placed their tips on eyes which were closed, covered by lids which had been made of skin but which now resembled nothing more than stone.

He spoke words. Strange, guttural words which seemed to taint the very air inside the tent with a foul odor and color which resembled yellow bile. The incantation was not long, but it called upon strange powers—some known throughout the history of man, others long buried in the sands of time. When it was over, the two fingers of the man whose name was Hashim lifted from the eyes

of the other. As they lifted, so did the eyelids upon which they had rested.

The deep-lined face of the petrified Mahmoud moved as its mouth opened to inhale the fouled air around it.

When, moments later, Hashim left the tent and began his stealthy trek across the sands, the thing which had been Mahmoud followed.

CHAPTER 3

It was almost a week later, halfway around the globe which men call Earth, that a six-foot-five giant of a man watched the last rays of the sun give way to the encroaching blackness of night. Cool air tingled the tanned skin of his naked, hard-muscled body, which was still wet from the water of the Atlantic, called Moriches Bay here in Westhampton on Long Island's southern shoreline.

In the fading rays of light, the body of the man looked as if it were carved from some glistening red stone, carved by a skilled artist who might have slightly exaggerated the contours of the steellike musculature on the two hundred and twenty pound frame. The thickness of his black eyebrows emphasized the almost demonic nature of the man's features and stood out in contrast to his otherwise completely hairless bullet head.

Under those thick eyebrows, Cameron Sanchez' dark brown eyes moved from the sinking sun to the surface of the water from which he'd just come. There was hardly a ripple. Very calm, too calm, and Cam Sanchez reflected upon the obvious. *The calm before the storm.* Not that there was a storm coming—not in the sense that one had

been predicted by the weather people. No, the kind of storm Cam Sanchez was thinking of was a storm of another nature. And the beginnings of its coming already were here.

As he reached down for the large towel and wrapped it around his waist, Cam turned his back to the sea and looked at the large manor which was some fifty yards from where he stood. There were thirty-five rooms in the building, which was one of three structures on the pine-secluded ten acres of prime real estate. It had been less than nine months ago that the old manor had been completely renovated for its present use. The nine months had been wilder than the Puerto Rican ex-cop had imagined possible when he signed on as an assistant to Professor Damien Harmon. And it was all due to what was in one of those thirty-five rooms.

The basement room.

It was as he thought of that particular room and what it contained that Cam caught himself unconsciously rubbing an area on his right shoulder. It was there, at a point just above where the side of his bicep met his massive shoulder muscle, that he carried the one flaw on what was otherwise a perfect body. It was a gothic letter S, and the scar tissue where the white-hot firebrand had seared the mark into his body had healed in a black-white mixture. A memento of a deadly adventure which ended in a Rhineland castle just two months earlier.* A memento he'd carry with him to the grave, and one which now and then

*See *THE WITCHING OF DRACULA*

throbbed strangely as if warning him of danger—or something worse than danger.

There was another memento his body carried, but it was of a more temporary nature. The scar was barely noticeable, though only a month old, but the poison which had entered his leg through the lower part of his calf had done its work—either that or he himself had done the damage as he tore the barbed spear from the gristle and muscle of his leg. A month ago in Brazil.* And the month before, Germany. And in the months previous, Romania and Jamaica. It was like the old navy recruiting advertisement. Join Harmon and see the world.

And pick up a few scars on the way, of course. But they never tell you about that part of it, do they?

The big Puerto Rican grinned at the thought. It really wasn't true. He had known in a general way what he was getting into when he'd signed on, some four years previous, to work for the man whose lawyers had kept Cameron Sanchez out of prison. The charge had been possession of heroin—a frame, but it was enough to get the young, eager, and effective rookie cop whose presence in Spanish Harlem was distasteful to the mob drummed out of police blue. It was then that the old man in the wheelchair, the old man with the shoulders of a bull and the face like a hawk and the leonine silver hair, barged into his jail cell and issued a flat statement:

“I'm going to get you off the hook, Mr. Sanchez.”

*See *DRACULA'S LOST WORLD*

The young rookie, bitter at the world, almost kicked what was a gift horse in the mouth. "Why? Is this Be Kind to Puerto Ricans Week?"

The old man had ignored the hostility. "I've been looking for a particular kind of man to work for me. I have made up my mind that you're it, and you can't very well do the job from a prison cell. You don't have to accept my help, of course, and if you do you don't have to accept the position I offer afterward. I believe in freedom of choice, even for such a one as yourself, who, it would seem to me, has little in the way of choices—unless of course you wish to martyr yourself for some obscure cause of your own."

Cam Sanchez was no martyr, so he accepted the man's help, which in terms of money and legal strategies was considerable. He then accepted the job. It was the kind of work he enjoyed, the same kind of work, generally, that he had been engaged in before he lost his uniform.

He and Harmon formed a very effective team. They hit the New York area crime syndicate from all directions. All very unofficial, of course. And very bloody.

It had been good. Until nine months ago. That was when they took that first trip to Romania. Even now, the consequences of that trip were shaping the fate of Cam Sanchez. For it was on that first trip—aside from the real business which they accomplished there—that Cam first met Alexandru Thorka. And it was on this very afternoon—today—that another message from the old Romanian scholar had come to Westhampton. Its method of delivery had been as odd as its contents.

It had come to New York through Interpol, and to the Westhampton manor through the hands of Sanford Proctor, another old acquaintance of Damien Harmon. Proctor was officially retired from police work, though he still “dabbled now and then,” as he liked to put it. The message itself came in three parts, the first a facsimile photograph of some Egyptian style picture writing, the second a photograph of a strangely shriveled corpse, and the third a cable which was short and to the point:

THORKA TO HARMON. THE SANDS OF EGYPT HAVE YIELDED UP A RATHER INTERESTING MYSTERY, INCLUDING THIS SO FAR INDECIPHERABLE PLAQUE AND THE DEATH OF THIS YOUNG REPEAT YOUNG MAN. ANOTHER DEATH ALSO, AND A THIRD MEMBER OF THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL TEAM UNDER PROFESSOR ISMAIL TARRAF IS MISSING. SO IS THE PICTURED BODY. IF YOU AND YOUR SPECIAL FRIENDS ARE INTRIGUED BY THIS, I ALREADY HAVE ARRANGED WITH THE PROPER AUTHORITIES FOR YOUR WELCOME HERE.

There were instructions for cabling Harmon's response, and that was all—except for the two photos. If that really had been a young man . . .

“Maybe Dr. Thorka is pulling your leg?” Cam had suggested.

Harmon took back the photograph from his assistant and examined it under the light of his study desk. “Alexandru Thorka does not pull legs. Not about matters like this, at least.”

“All right. Then maybe his meaning doesn't come across correctly. Maybe what he means is

that the body is that of a young man, but one dead for a long time—maybe a mummy, one that's been unwrapped."

The professor's lips curled up into a smile. "Unwrapped, Cam? I doubt it, and for two reasons. First, archaeologists don't go around unwrapping their mummified finds."

"And the second reason?"

Harmon's smile grew broader. "Even if they did unwrap the wrappings, they wouldn't redress the body in a modern set of shirt and trousers."

Cam took the photograph again as the professor gave his attention to the picture of the hieroglyphics. Sanford Proctor had settled into a deep wingback chair by the fireplace with a brandy he helped himself to, and now he spoke up for the first time.

"Interesting, isn't it? As your Romanian friend says." He raised a hand. "Naturally, I read the material, Damien. I certainly wasn't going to come all the way out here without at least satisfying my mild curiosity as to what a communique through Interpol contained."

Harmon nodded. "You are correct in your first statement. It is interesting. But as to the second, I must disagree. Your curiosity, Sandy, could never in even the wildest understatement be described as mild. I would hazard the flat opinion that right now you are eating up your insides wondering if I'll respond to this message in the affirmative."

"That you'll go to Egypt?" Proctor asked. "I have no doubt at all that you'll go. What I wonder about is that reference to your friends. 'Your special friends' are the words he used, I believe."

"Cameron, of course, is one."

"And that young lady. Miss Ktara, I believe her name is. She would be another."

"That's right."

Harmon paused, knowing that there would be more from Proctor. Cam knew too that the professor's friend was no man's fool and that he had been keeping tabs on the doings of Harmon—unofficially—for some time. Proctor suspected his friend was mixed up in some very strange doings. When he spoke again, he did so in a very matter of fact manner—except that the manner was just a bit too casual, a studied casualness almost.

"Just the three of you?"

Harmon, on his part, matched Proctor's mood precisely: "More or less, Sandy. Now, I don't wish to rush you in your departure, but I know you must have something more important to do than to—"

"To keep you from your important business, correct?" Taking the hint, Proctor rose and drained the last of the brandy. "Very well, I know when I'm not wanted," he said good-naturedly. "But I'll tell you this, Damien. One day I would love to visit your house out here with an all-purpose search warrant. I'd be willing to wager that I'd find some interesting things. Perhaps incriminating things."

Harmon laughed. "Incriminating? You know full well, Sandy, that I gave up crime a long time ago. That was a thing of my misdirected youth—which the authorities saw fit to correct."

The reference was not to any criminal acts of Harmon but to his short stint on the New York police force, which ended when his spine was

crushed by a mobster's lead pipe. Since then—that was 1938—he'd moved under his own power only with the aid of a wheelchair. Dismissed from the force because of disobeying an order to remain out of the "field," he turned to teaching, a job for which he was well qualified, since he held two PhD degrees and a Master's. But he left the job when he decided that it interfered with his two major subjects of interest. The first was crime—an interest he supposedly had given up. He became, with the help of a procession of assistants, the latest of whom was Cam Sanchez, a judge, jury, and executioner. The second subject was more suited to his intellectual pursuits.

It was the occult.

As Proctor now passed through the booklined study, Cam reflected that half of the book titles dealt with aspects of the "dark studies," the other half with scientific and technical subjects. At least that was the distinction *he* made. Harmon did not quite see it that way: "The basis for the dark arts may be different from our so-called scientific methods, Cam, but isn't the real point whether or not the stuff works?" The question, when asked—it seemed so long ago—was then theoretical. Cam had replied that he supposed the professor was right—in theory. If the same question was asked of him now, he'd have to reply that the professor was right *in fact*. He'd seen much too much to say otherwise.

"Oh, yes," Proctor said, pausing at the hall door. "Please give my best to Miss Ktara. Tell her that I'm sorry to have missed her."

Harmon nodded as the portly man stepped around the large black cat that was entering the

library from the hall at that moment, a cat which seemed to gaze at Proctor with interest in its yellow green eyes.

Cam saw the visitor to the outside door and watched as Proctor's Lincoln pulled from the driveway. When he returned to the study, the cat was nowhere to be seen—instead, sitting in a chair to the side of Harmon's desk examining the photographs Proctor had brought, was a woman in black.

Black crewneck blouse, long-sleeved. Black slacks. Black hair, shoulder length, surrounding an oval face which was more than beautiful, a face whose immediately commanding features were the two yellow green eyes which seemed all-knowing. She looked to be in her mid-twenties to mid-thirties, but she was older than that.

Much older.

"You recognize the writing?" Harmon asked.

Her head nodded slightly. "The writing and the message it contains, yes. And the dead man." Her voice was smooth like silk, but strangely accented. It was not as if she were speaking in a foreign tongue, but rather as if any tongue—or the spoken form of communication—was a somewhat clumsy way to communicate one's thoughts.

"You know the dead man?" Harmon picked up.

"No." Her eyes half-closed as they inspected the photograph more closely. "His name was Mahmoud, for what it matters. But, no, I do not know him, not personally. What I meant was, I recognize the cause of his death." She looked from the photograph to Harmon. "You are planning to accept Dr. Thorka's invitation."

It was not a question, but not a statement, either. It was something in between. As powerful as Ktara's mental powers were, she had her limitations. One of them was her inability to read mental vibrations—or impose her mental will—on a mind protected by steel. Harmon's brain was encased by a plate of that metal, a second and lasting legacy of that 1938 lead pipe. "What would be your suggestion?" he asked the woman.

"I have none, not for the present." Her eyes now turned toward the window, through which the light of afternoon poured into the room.

Both men understood. The suggestion, when it came, would not come from Ktara. It would come from the one she called her Master.

There was no trace of the sunlight now as Cam, the towel around his middle, entered the manor. Quickly, he took the stairs to the third floor and entered his room. Once inside, his movements were efficient, stripping off the towel and putting his legs through a pair of white trousers, his feet into a battered pair of moccasins. It was as he was putting his arms through the short sleeves of his pullover shirt that his mouth tensed. The fact that it was a crewneck, like the woman wore, came home to him. It seemed to be the fashion in this place, as if he and the woman had the idea that the thin layer of cloth would protect their necks from—

He shook off the feeling, but before he left the room he took something from the top left drawer of a bureau which stood to the right of the door.

A silver cross on a silver chain.

When he reached the first floor, he found that

the light to the side of the elevator in the hall showed the car to be at basement level. Harmon and Ktara were already down there, having used the special lift which gave the crippled man access to all levels of the house. Moving to the left of the elevator panel, Cam thumbed back the latch on the thick door which opened to the stone stairs. He took them, not three at a time as he had when he'd descended from the third floor, but one by one. The movement of his right hand to the cross inside his shirt was conscious.

The basement was large, its white walls and ceiling bright with light from the ceiling fluorescents. But even the brightness added to the eeriness of the long room. The bone-whiteness of the walls, the stark shadows under the shelves, the workbenches which housed items of electronic equipment, and the chemicals and their containers—and the nature of at least one of those chemicals—combined to give the room a feeling that was at the very least uncomfortable. There was a dampness and a darkness about the room which Cam had felt even before . . .

Before the thing that rested on the floor in the center of the room had been brought here.

The “thing” was a large and elaborately carved casket. Inside its white satin interior was a quantity of dark soil. And something else.

The professor and the woman were at one of the workbenches, the woman watching as Harmon turned the dials of what looked to be an uncomplicated piece of electronic equipment. It was far from simple. Cam knew that of its nine main parts each was a complexity unto itself. He had helped construct it—that much he was

proud of, that and the knowledge of electronics he had picked up during the past four years, primarily from sampling the technical works in Harmon's library. He also could take some pride in the fact that, were it not for this complex device, their control over the thing which rested within the casket would be non-existent.

The device was a recharger. Somewhere on the order of every two weeks Harmon used the thing. What it recharged was a unit which had been implanted close to the professor's heart. The small unit emitted a steady beam of energy—energy which could be shut off under two conditions. One of them was if Harmon willed a little lever forward—and moved it by telekinesis, a power he had not developed fully but which he had enough of to accomplish this simple task. The second condition which would shut off the power was a less glamorous—and less desirable—action:

The stopping of Harmon's heart. In a word, death.

As Cam approached the work table, Harmon turned the dials to zero. "You're just in time," the professor told his assistant. Briefly the lids of his eyes closed. Cam could picture the mentally called-up finger of white energy moving the tiny lever—Harmon had described how the process "looked" to him several times—moving the lever and engaging the contacts. Then the sending forth of the small beam from the implant, newly re-energized and seeking the compatible target—which was a second unit of the same small size as the one within Harmon and, like the first, was implanted beneath a heart. The second unit,

however, upon locking onto the wave of energy, did no sending. Quite the opposite. It retracted something from the heart under which it was lodged. A small sliver of wood which originally had been part of a large stake. A stake which had once been implanted—by a powerful thrust—into the same heart from which the sliver was being removed.

Cam's eyes went from Harmon's face to the woman. She had moved from the workbench to one of the shelves along the wall and now was taking from the shelf a bottle of dark liquid. Cam's eyes changed their point of focus again. He did not like to look overly long upon the fluid within that glass. It was a synthetic, one which Harmon had spent long hours in perfecting, but it still had the foul smell—as well as the major components—of the real thing.

Blood.

"No."

The single word was uttered quietly, but it echoed from the walls like a cannon shot. Cam's eyes—as well as those of Harmon and Ktara—now were on the casket in the center of the room, the casket which was now open.

He stood at the side of the casket. Tall, solidly built, dressed in immaculate black evening attire, complete with a red-lined cloak. His black hair was combed back straight from the widow's peak which topped his aristocratic forehead, and it was obvious at once that he was of the nobility. The Roman nose expressed it, as did the arched eyebrows and the slightly amused smile with which he greeted the three onlookers. His skin was white, whiter than that of Ktara; it was as if it had never

seen the rays of the sun. Yet there was about his person the aura of darkness.

Darkness and strength.

That his physique was strong there could be no doubt. His height and carriage showed at a glance that he was more than a match for the giant, Sanchez. And when the change took place . . .

The change. Harmon and Cam had seen it all too often, when the neatly symmetrical hairline moved down to meet eyebrows which no longer were amused but wild, when the aristocratic nose flattened like that of some raging beast, when the lips pulled back over teeth which normally were long and sharp but which became the fangs of a man-eater, when the red-centered eyes flashed lightning-white suns—when there was no human force which could hope to withstand the mighty assault which could end in only one way. A horrible, terrible death.

But the sense of strength, even in his present visage, was more than physical. There was an aura of mental power, too, about this person—a strength of will and of intellect which communicated itself even in his uttering of a single word.

“No,” he repeated.

But Ktara held the bottle of red fluid higher. “You require nourishment, Master.”

“And I shall have it.” The red eyes flickered toward the man in the wheelchair and the Puerto Rican. The voice, which like that of the woman had a strange foreign sound to it, continued: “I shall have it. However, I shall sustain myself with something other than this unpalatable substitute.”

Harmon's voice cut the air like steel. "We have had this discussion before. It bores me."

The amused mouth of him who stood by the casket grew less amused. The red eyes flashed.

"Professor Harmon. Has there yet been an instance when you have awakened me when there has not followed a time of my quenching my thirst with human blood?"

In the pause which followed, Cam considered the question. And the answer came quickly. There had been no such time. He who had been called by many names in many places and over many years was correct. Dead on target.

Count Dracula inclined his head toward Ktara. "Thank you, my dear. But no thank you." And now to Harmon, the smile returning:

"What is it this time? What enemy will you ask me to vanquish? What evil do you wish to battle through the evil you believe me to represent? And—perhaps most important of all—what makes you believe I will comply with your request?"

Harmon laughed.

"*You laugh at me?*" Again, the amused look had vanished.

"I laugh, yes," Harmon replied. "Not at you, however. Let us say I laugh at the situation. You see, I want nothing from you. Nothing whatsoever."

And now it was that the red eyes again turned to Ktara. And the silence began.

The mind-to-mind process worked swiftly, the minds of the two ancient ones being in complete sympathy. The Count had not the mind-reading ability of the woman, but their thoughts were open to one another, completely open. Theirs was a re-

lationship which Cam—and Harmon—had tried unsuccessfully to understand. It was true that the one Ktara called Master was in fact that. In a contest of wills between them, there was no question of the victor. But there was definitely a mutual dependence. Since that time—seven, eight thousand years ago?—when they had been the two sole survivors of the Deluge, the destruction of that first land which some men call Atlantis, there had been many of what Ktara, in that strange book she called her *Runes*, termed cycles. Cycles which affected them both as described so well in the pages of her verse:

*When they—they—come and wrench apart
His living life, his pulsing heart,
Then I, his slave, at his last cry
Myself each time begin to die,
The process moving toward its end
Until I find the one to send,
The one who'll come, the one who'll take
From my Black Lord the killer stake.*

Begin to die. Meaning that, at that moment he who most lately had been called Dracula received the immobilizing stake in the heart, she began to age, to age just as any normal human being. For her a terrible thing, yet—yet this last “cycle” she had waited so long. She had been an old woman, stately but *old*, when she came that night, nine months ago, to Harmon and Cam.*

The one who'll take. That had been Cam himself. But why had she waited so long? It was as

*See *DRACULA RETURNS!*

if she hadn't wanted to revive the Count, as if she'd put it off as long as she could . . .

Master. And slave. And yet the so-called Lord needed his slave just as much as she needed him. Cam did not understand the relationship fully. He doubted that Harmon understood it. And sometimes—when his mind turned to things philosophical, in the darkest of the night when the surf was pounding upon the shore and the branches of the tall pines battered the great man—or they surrounded—he wondered if the principle characters in the drama themselves understood it. The dependence, the sympathy, and lives—and deaths—they endured in the name of immortality.

But Cam's reflection was broken off by a voice of rage. The Count's:

"It cannot be!"

Ktara's response was more calm. "The time draws near. The old ones are coming closer—we both know that."

Dracula's eyes flashed at Harmon, then returned to Ktara. "He knows?"

Ktara smiled. "He suspects much. He does not *know*. But this intelligence that we have received—"

"It cannot be other than you have surmised," the Count said levelly. "Should this—this venomous creature from the past be allowed to interfere, he could hasten the time of confrontation. He deals with things more deadly than the human mind can imagine, more deadly than even he can imagine. If, after six thousand years, he has returned to live, he must finally be made to understand his error—or he must be done away with!"

It was Harmon's words which now interrupted.

“Why? And who? Who is it you speak of? Ktara’s *Runes* contain no hint of—”

Ktara broke in. “Professor, you have read my work with much care. You may recall the name of one who was apprenticed to my Master. His name was—is—*Herak!*”

The name brought a strange look to the professor’s eyes. Cam himself remembered the lines:

Then Herak tried.

Then Herak died.

“Herak,” he said aloud. “He died.”

The Count smiled. “Died. So my Ktara wrote, Mr. Sanchez. But the concept of death allows many interpretations. After all, I myself have died many times. Herak died, yes. And now Herak lives. Perhaps it is that he must die again. And quickly.”

The last two words were directed at Harmon who received them with a short bow of his head.

“I take it, Count Dracula, that you are willing to accompany us to Egypt. I assume also that you will not attempt any act which—”

Dracula’s laugh was one of scorn. “Do not press me, Professor Harmon. I have business to attend to in the land you call Egypt. You—and your assistant—are as nothing to me in comparison with that business. I shall accompany you willingly, the sooner we leave the better. I suggest you use whatever methods possible to communicate with your old friend Thorka that he may expect you—as soon as possible. As for the other matter, that of my attempting—”

But he was cut off by the sound of a clanging bell. Both Cam and Harmon recognized it for the connection to the bell which was activated

from the outside of the front door. They had visitors—or a visitor. It was Ktara who told them who it was.

“Your niece, Professor,” she said, her eyes looking straight into Cam’s. “Miss Jennifer Harmon stands without, awaiting entrance from within.”

4

CHAPTER 4

Cam's voice was almost a growl as he pulled open the front door. "What are you doing here?" Even as he asked it, he was looking back over his shoulder to make sure that both the elevator door and the door leading to the basement stairs were closed. It was when he turned his eyes front that the girl answered him.

"I'm waiting to be allowed in, Mr. Sanchez. A task I can accomplish with no little trouble once you step back from blocking my way."

Her tone was clipped, impatient, but Cam could not fail to feel a small warmth in the pit of his stomach from the figure and the face of the girl who stood on the other side of the threshold.

Jennifer Harmon, at nineteen, was a fine example of Miss Young America at her best. The man-tailored shirt and faded jeans she now wore showed off a willowy figure, and the long and loosely hanging blonde hair surrounded a rosy cheeked face that spoke volumes about health and freshness. Yet that same face of this girl-not-yet-woman, with its finely chiseled features and its quick eyes, bespoke a will that was used to having its way. What Cam had called the Harmon spirit—in the niece as well as the uncle—was a force to

be reckoned with. It was also something which had almost led to personal disaster for himself as well as the girl on two occasions.*

"Mr. Sanchez." More impatient than before.

He stood his ground. "I'm sorry. What I meant to say was, what are you doing here?"

"That, Mr. Sanchez, is precisely what you *did* say."

"I meant"—*to stall for time* is what he really meant—"why aren't you out there at that flaming liberal college you go to? The semester isn't over yet, is it?"

Her eyes flashed. "I wish to argue neither the politics nor the relative merits of Berkeley. Nor do I think it necessary to explain to you why it is I am here at the moment. The point is that I am here."

There was no disputing that, Cam decided. And there had been enough time for the others to do what had to be done.

"All right," he said gruffly. "Come on in." As he stepped aside he noted that she had luggage. If you could call it that. He picked up the large knapsack from outside the door. "Going camping, Miss Harmon?"

She had passed him, but now she turned. The fire was out of her eyes, replaced by something else. Cam knew the look for what it was—but, hell, she was nineteen. And Damien Harmon's niece.

"I thought—" she said. "I thought you might be happy to see me."

He thought about it, also thinking that his attitude toward her so far was probably not what

*See *THE HAND OF DRACULA*, *THE DRUMS OF DRACULA*

she either expected or deserved after a long flight from the West Coast. Then he thought about the inconvenience of her presence.

"Madam, the house of Harmon is deliriously happy to see one of its most fair scions. The reaction of the master of the house of Harmon may be, however, at some variance with that state. Please come with me to the library."

He moved past her and started down the hall, the girl following swiftly to keep up."

"The library—is that where Uncle Damien is?"

"Not now. Shortly, however," he told her, his thumb shooting out and depressing the elevator call button. The girl neither saw the action nor heard the slight *whir* which followed.

She was in the middle of fixing herself a gin and tonic when Harmon wheeled himself into the room. Looking up, her eyes went quickly past him to the woman in black behind the chair. For just an instant Jennifer Harmon's eyes narrowed.

"Uncle," she said, smiling.

Harmon did not return the smile. "I assume that Cam asked you what in blazes you were doing here?"

"He asked, yes. Three times, in fact."

"And, just one time if you don't mind, what in blazes did you tell him?"

"He did not ask overly nicely."

"Nor will I, young lady—if you don't stop fiddling with my glassware and alcohol and give me an explanation before my patience erupts like a long overdue volcano. *What in hell are you doing here?*"

"Uncle—"

"Tell him, Jennifer," Ktara said softly. "Tell him of the honors program."

The girl's eyes widened. "How—"

"What honors program?" Harmon snapped over his shoulder.

"I do not have all the details," the woman in black replied.

The professor inhaled slowly. "Well, Jennifer?"

The girl still was looking at Ktara with amazement. "I don't understand how—"

"Jennifer!"

"All right." Somewhat exasperated. "It's not all that hard to explain. I'm in an honors program, one that requires quite a bit of original research. One that also requires that I coop myself up like some kind of bookworm. I've been given the time to complete the work, and I thought this place might be a good one for working. Especially since I'm familiar with some of the titles in this room. Of course, I thought—silly of little me, I know—that I might be welcomed here, but as soon as I ring the bell there's Cam—excuse me; *Mr. Sanchez*—acting as if I've got a social disease which is not spoken of in polite company. And now there's your attitude, Uncle. I recognize that I arrived unannounced, but I thought you just might be glad to see me."

There was a pause, while each of the three others in the room made a private assessment as to how much acting versus real emotion was involved in the almost-to-the-point-of-tears voice which quivered at the end of the last statement. Only one of the three knew for certain, and Ktara kept her own counsel. It was Harmon who broke first:

"Very well. You may remain here. I suppose it is

just as well that you do. I leave tomorrow—Cam and Ktara accompany me.”

“Leave? Where are you—”

“That, my girl, is none of your business. I suggest you now either make that foolish drink you have begun or sample some of the really excellent liquid within the bar. In any event, I want you up in your room—with drink or without—in ten minutes. I have work to do.”

“But where—”

“Jennifer, I will have no more to say on that subject.”

As the professor ended his sentence, he looked up at Cam harshly. Cam was smiling and, in turn, he was looking at the serious face of Ktara. Both of them knew, from whatever cause, that Harmon would have more to say to his niece on the subject he’d just dismissed. What one of them did not know—which accounted for Cam’s smile—was the result of that further discussion.

As the twin-engine jet which had brought them on the final leg of their trip—from Alexandria to the southern desert dig—discharged its passengers and baggage, Cam’s eyes began to scan the official greeting party. It appeared to be a solemn line of grim men, one of whom was stepping hastily toward the spot where Cam was assisting the descent of Harmon’s chair down the sloping ramp. The man was solidly built, somewhat like a squarish block of stone. Although he was a bit older than Harmon, he exhibited an eternally youngish face, surrounded by short salt-and-pepper hair.

“Damien,” Alexandru Thorka said, extending his hand and grasping that of Harmon firmly. “And

Mr. Sanchez—excellent to see you both.” It was as his hand took Cam’s that his eyes brightened. “And Miss Ktara—yes, I was certain you too would be along. And—”

He stopped, a momentary question on his face, then he smiled. “And this must be your niece, Damien. Miss Jennifer Harmon, I am delighted to finally meet you, but I would have thought this not to be an appropriate time.”

He was not alone in that thought, of course. But Harmon will had confronted Harmon will, and the younger of the two had won the day. “But Egypt!” Jenny had insisted. “And an archaeological dig! Uncle Damien, you *must* let me come!” To his return argument that she had her paper to write, she countered that she could bring whatever she needed with her. “This is a chance to see something I might never see again!” Cam knew that Ktara read his subsequent thought clearly: *How very true.*

But the battle had been fought and was over, and this morning in the desert sunlight, Jenny Harmon graciously extended her hand to her uncle’s old Romanian friend. “I’ve heard much about you, Dr. Thorka, and may I say that meeting you—at any time—is indeed an honor.”

The Romanian bowed. “Would that my university students only felt the same way, Miss Harmon.” His eyes turned to Harmon. “Come. There are others you must meet at once.” But he did not move immediately. He was watching the door of the small airplane.

Harmon told him what he wanted to know. “Yes, Alex. We have brought with us our special equipment.”

"And very secretive about it, too, they are," Jenny added. "I for one am dying to know what they've locked up in that big crate of theirs."

Thorka's tone grew somber. "For some tasks, special tools are needed. I would not concern myself with what tools we use, my dear. Some can be very delicate—and dangerous to those not instructed in their use."

Jenny laughed brightly. "Don't worry, Dr. Thorka, I've given my word that I'll not get in anyone's way. It was a condition I had to swear to more times than I can remember. I am surprised that I didn't have to take a blood oath!"

"Yes," Thorka said, his voice still serious. "A blood oath. That might have been appropriate."

They moved to meet the officials, all of whom—including Professor Tarraf—Cam found to be men who were mystified by what had been found at the dig and what had happened subsequently. The Egyptian equivalent of an all points bulletin had been issued on the young man named Hashim since he was the prime suspect in the murder of the young girl and the theft of Mahmoud's body. In addition, certain items that had been found within the dig were missing.

While Jenny was being shown the dig itself by three of Professor Tarraf's young assistants, Tarraf and Thorka brought Harmon and the other two of his party to the tent where the bronze plaque was stored. Thorka viewed the symbols with awe.

"Neither Professor Tarraf nor myself can translate the message, Damien, though it obviously is some kind of proto-Egyptian writing. The thing which is most curious about it—and that which

prompted me to think that you and your, ah, friends might take an active interest in its finding—are these recurring sets of symbols here.”

Harmon and Cam both knew which sets of symbols their Romanian friend was referring to. The photograph which Thorka had sent them by facsimile was not, however, particularly clear. Here, now, there was no mistaking that they had got the appropriate meaning from the symbols on the photograph.

One of the recurring sets showed a dark-robed man drawing blood from the neck of a woman. Another of the sets showed a woman kneeling in a slave posture before the same dark man; in each case, the kneeling woman had the head of a cat. In both sets, wherever they occurred, the head of the dark-robed man was that of a long-fanged serpent which looked like something more than just a snake.

Thorka's eyes burned with excitement. “A dragon, almost, one would think, were it not for the fact that the dragon is not a symbol normally associated with Egyptian mythology. But that, of course, is at the very root of the problem, since none of the creature-symbols can be identified with any of those known to be in the Egyptian mythological cosmos—except perhaps for Apef, if in fact this symbol does refer to that monster of menace.”

“It does, Doctor.”

All eyes turned to Ktara. Of the four men, two of them knew she could read the symbols as if they were yesterday's newspaper. But she had so far kept her own counsel on the plaque—and everything else, other than what had been re-

vealed during her conversation with the Count. But that she could read the plaque in its entirety, and even supply the meaning of the missing section, Harmon and Cam had no doubt. Of the other two men, Thorka suspected that the woman's beginnings lay deep in the hidden past and thus he was not totally surprised to hear her words. The fourth man, however—

"It *does?*" Professor Tarraf blurted out. "How can you be sure? Are you someone whose name I should recognize as an expert in such things? If so, forgive me, but—"

Thorka spoke up. "Miss Ktara has had a long interest in such matters. That is why I thought she and Professor Harmon might be of assistance to us."

"But you have not published?" Tarraf pressed.

"Not with any regularity, Professor," Ktara said. "No, I have not published."

It was not strictly true, Cam thought to himself. *The Runes of Ktara*, that book of deep and dangerous mysteries shrouded in cryptic verse, was not one which had had very wide distribution. But within its pages, if all could be deciphered in terms of its real meaning, were all the answers to all the questions that men like Professor Tarraf spent their lifetimes asking—and, for the most part, asking without reward.

Picking up Cam's thought, Ktara said to Tarraf, "The key to the complete translation will not elude you and Dr. Thorka for very long, I am sure of it. If your knowledge is sufficient to recognize the Apef sign—which I am certain it is because you say it is—then I am confident that the secrets the bronze holds will yield with time."

Tarraf did not look convinced, but he did not press further. "There for a moment I had thought you meant that you already could translate the meaning."

"That," Harmon broke in, "was not the impression Ktara meant to give." To change the subject he moved his chair from before the bronze to the other items which had been recovered. "Anything other than the plaque which was unusual?" Indeed, there did not appear to be. The tent was cluttered with the normal shards of pottery and metal instruments, some of peace, some of war.

Tarraf scowled. "There were some unusual items but they no longer are here. But, yes—we do have *this*."

This turned out to be, not the locked metal box which the Egyptian scholar brought from between two crates, but what was inside. It had been a bottle or flask or beaker, constructed of red stoneware.

"The finding of this was what began the entire dark business," Tarraf said. "Thus I keep it out of sight. There is an unusual thing about it that no one noticed until the next morning, when we had a chance to examine it more closely—well, look here on the inside surface of this large section."

They looked. As they did so, Thorka mused. "Unless I am wrong, that substance will test out as calcium. Odd, then, that the deposit would take the shape of a miniature skeleton—a miniature human skeleton."

It was after Thorka and Tarraf left and the visitors from America had settled into their tents—Jenny and Ktara sharing one, Harmon and Cam and their equipment sharing another—that Ktara,

coming to Harmon's tent, spoke of the red shards.

"There is now no room for doubt. Herak has returned."

Harmon nodded. "And who, now that we've traveled halfway around the world to confirm your suspicions—who is Herak?"

She answered the question indirectly. "Long ago, Professor Harmon, when there was life here, when this was the site of a modest sized but advanced city, the priests of the place had a saying: *When Fortune frowns, the Fates smile. But the stars merely blink.*"

"I am not sure I follow," Harmon said.

"The meaning of the saying is that whatever of enormity happens to man and those things he is concerned about, including the upheaval of great mountains and the sinking of great lands, the stars in their courses move along as if nothing had happened, caring nothing, touched by nothing."

"That much I understand. It was your calling up the saying with respect to the present situation—"

"With respect to the present situation," she interrupted, "let Fortune and the Fates do as they will. Unless Jerak is stopped, the stars will not merely blink—"

"They may well drip blood."

CHAPTER 5

The villa was large, its two-level interior exhibiting the vast wealth of its owner, its high surrounding walls testifying to the owner's determination to have privacy. The owner had several businesses throughout the country, but his own offices, which he visited infrequently, were located in Idfu, some thirty miles to the east. The owner, however, would never again visit his offices, nor would he ever again transact any dealings of business. Dead men care not for such matters.

It was close to ten and, up on the flat walled-in roof of the villa, the eldest son of the man who had ruled the household sat staring at the stars. He stared at them as he had never done before—for the eyes which looked upward belonged to those of the eldest son, but the mind which sorted the visual data belonged to quite another person.

Six thousand years!

It had been that long. No wonder the stars looked so different, no wonder that the land and its people were so strange. Where now is the dark world? Where now is that red ball of death and the gods of horror who dwell upon it? Or do they still live?

Six thousand years. Much could have happened

within that time span. He himself had dwelt in a limbo of nothingness. Could perhaps the dark red globe have passed from the limits of the cosmos? Could it in fact have perished altogether?

He must know. He—Herak—must know the fates of the Old Ones whose very names once made the earth tremble.

His eyes had become transfixed upon that area of sky where he last saw the deadly world of terror. Yet, even then, even those thousands of years ago, he had not been able to see that dark thing with the naked eye nor even with the strongest of magnifying glasses. Then there had been but one way to ferret out the location. But it was a dangerous way. The Master had warned him, but then the Master had his own designs on the deadly world and its inhabitants. He, Herak, had his designs also. And he had acquired the skills necessary to accomplish the task. That was why the Master—the stealer of blood, the *drinker* of blood—had become determined to rid himself of Herak. But *now* . . .

“Where are you now, oh Master?” he said with a scornful laugh. The tongue he used was modern Egyptian Arabic, but from the minds of several men he also knew the language which, though not native to the land, somehow was regarded as the master tongue. English, the tongue of a people of an island to the far, cold north. A tongue of a people who were not in this land with any force, yet the master tongue. An odd thing, this, but one which Herak accepted. Regardless of the oddity it represented, not to become fluent in the tongue of those who mastered—or thought they mastered—the world would be a foolish thing.

And he had become firm in one specific. This time he would do nothing foolish. Nothing. His mind had been young in that other life, his zeal had been uncontainable. Now, although his mental processes were as fresh as they were six thousand years ago, that long interim and its causes had brought a certain maturity, and with maturity comes caution. He had been reckless. He would be reckless no more.

He rose, moving to the enclosed stucco stairwell which took him down two levels, down to the high-ceilinged main room of the villa. When he reached the center of the room, he looked around it.

"Greetings, my family," he said, this time in English. Yes, use the master tongue so that it becomes your own. Just as he had used the house as if it were his own. And the family—

The owner and his wife and their second son lay dead where they had fallen after the life had been strangled from their fleshy throats. Seated in flanking corners, as if guarding the recently dead, were two seemingly petrified bodies of men, their warped eyes vacant, their jaws distended. To them also Herak directed a greeting:

"And you, my friends Mahmoud and Hashim. Your bodies served me well, and they shall serve me again. Wait with patience. It may be we will have to prowl the sands again this night and, if that be so, I shall arrange some measure of merriment for you. Would you like that, my brothers?"

But neither of the dried husks of men responded in any way. They would not be able to do so, or to do anything else until the words and blood of revival were again administered to them.

Enough of this. There were preparations to be made. Leaving the main room of the villa, Herak walked swiftly through the book-lined library—where he had learned much about the strange world into which he'd awakened—and up the stairs to the second level. Off the hall was the high-ceilinged master bedroom.

"Good evening, my sister," he said with a smile.

The girl responded only with frightened eyes. She could respond by little else, so tightly were the bonds tied which held her naked body flat to the bedspread. Little in the way of body movement was possible, and the adhesive taped across her mouth prohibited a verbal protest of any kind. There was a second bandage covering a part of her throat, and it was this bandage which Herak now removed.

"It is time again, my lovely one," he told the wild eyes which sought in his hands the sharp-tipped knife he did not yet hold. "In a moment, my dear, in a moment. Perhaps you would prefer something else—something other than the cutting. Perhaps you would prefer that I violate your body in a more normal way."

The girl's whole body shuddered as his fingers lightly touched her lower stomach.

"That, too, is a horrible thought, is it not? For one such as yourself—a virgin. You are a virgin, are you not? You are one who has remained pure for that time when a suitable man can be found? You are whole, is that not true?"

The girl's head bobbed furiously, the movement a frantic voluntary counterpoint to the involuntary spasms with which her lower body

reacted to the barely touching tracings of the man's fingers across her stomach.

"I could inspect you, you know, so there is no use in your lying to me." He smiled down at her with her brother's face. Yes, he could inspect her but he did not want to do so. Even now, the squirming girl stretched out before him offered a temptation which would totally divert him from his mission. It was the real wisdom of the ancients which dictated that the priesthood be kept from the vicinity of women except for special times during the year when they could satiate their maleness. Herak himself, in those long ago days, had never known the comfort of a woman. He had followed the path of physical purity so as to increase his mental and spiritual strengths. The fact was that, yes, he could inspect this girl, but the additional fact was that he was not all that certain as to what did or did not provide proof of virginity. How odd and in a way humiliating for one such as himself, who had been—and was now—on the way to a kind of triumph of which lesser men only dreamed.

He lifted his hand from the girl. His mental strength had not yet become full. Soon it would, soon he would read all others' thoughts as if they were spoken aloud to him. Yet, in this case, he had not yet the need. No, there was another, more sure method of knowing the facts regarding her purity.

He left the bedside for a moment, returning with the bright golden basin with the interior mirror finish. And now the girl's eyes found in his right hand the thing they had sought before. The sharp blade which drew near to—and into—the

flesh of her throat. She wanted to scream but she knew no sound could pass through her lips so tightly compressed under the strong adhesive. She also knew that a sudden movement of her vocal chords could cause her death at the tip of that sharp knife. She knew she must remain still, very still. He had told her that the other times. She would not die from the wound. All he wanted was a small quantity of her blood, that was all.

That was all!

What had this man—her brother—become?

Two, three days previous, he had come in from outside. He had been looking at the gardens, but when he'd returned to the house, he looked so strange. And then, coming through the door behind him—

Those things! Those ungodly creatures shaped like human beings, their gnarled hands grasping her mother and father, choking them and her other brother while he—*he*—looked on with that crazed smile on his face.

Her brother, but not her brother. He who had been so kind, so warm, so gentle, now was some kind of cruel animal, one which drank blood . . .

Twice so far he had cut into her throat with that small knife, twice he had put his foul lips upon her flesh and twice he had backed off from her, his lips red-wet with the fluid of her life. But it was as if he himself did not enjoy the act, for there was little in the way of satisfaction in his taut face, in his burning eyes. And then he would extract more of her blood, not much, just a little in fact—and place it in a little vial. "To prepare the instruments," is all he said in the way of explanation. But now, this time . . .

He did not drink from her throat. Instead his fingers kneaded her flesh so that the liquid was directed into that bright golden bowl, the surface of which was so fascinating to her even under the terrifying circumstances, and even now as she strained her eyes trying, impossibly, to see that bright surface, to see her own red blood filling that mirror interior, she had the feeling that the monstrous thing her brother had become was involved in much more than she possibly could fathom. That bowl, the other instruments which he had arranged and "prepared" so painstakingly by the open bedroom window, the taking of her blood—all this had some purpose, some dark purpose which she knew to be more horrible than the deaths of her parents, more terrifying than the change in her beloved brother, more gruesome than the two dried husks of men whose hands of stone had brought choking death into her home.

And now it seemed over, the taking of her blood—for this time at least. Her brother was rising from the bedside, his eyes not looking at her at all but transfixed upon the bright golden bowl and what it contained.

And now she could see only his back as he moved carefully to the window, as he placed the bowl down and sat before it . . . as he began speaking words which she had never heard, chanting phrases that somehow she knew had not been heard in this world for thousands of years . . .

"Aaa nerau sexem sexemu. Tak peha hert ent heh set ent hesiu . . ."

The pool of blood coagulates, broils in upon its molecular self, its maze of thin-substance tendrils

rearranging themselves at the command of the words of control. They heat, they cool, they rise, they fall, all to the dictates of the patterns, the old patterns which cannot fail to effect the desired changes when they are in command of one who knows the words, of one who knows the power . . .

"Samaa em xu, sepsi ager nu Neterzert para henasen er maa neferuk . . ."

Soon now would the pool of red-black calm itself, soon now would he spy out its placid surface, just as he had that last time. Six thousand years ago . . .

And the memory of that last time forced itself upon Herak's mind . . . how he had gained the chance, how the attempt had failed, how the Master had not deigned to free him from his prison . . .

The white-faced Master did not at first wish Herak's assistance, but the young man had knelt before him, pleading his case. It was the woman who had argued on his behalf—no, not on his behalf, but on behalf of the task itself. There was little time, she told the Master. "This one may be of assistance," she said. "He is quick of mind, his enthusiasm will fire long hours of work."

"And his ambition?" the Master asked. "What of that? Will not that interfere?"

"My ambition is but to serve you, Master," Herak had insisted. But the Master had not been certain of him. As for the woman, she who had the powers of reading the mental thoughts of others—powers which Herak himself later had mastered under her tutelage—she gave her opinion that ambition was there, but that, as in everything else, "ambition can be controlled. If Herak does not

control it himself, then it may be that other controls will have to be brought to bear."

The thought of what those "other controls" might be had chilled the young Herak to the marrow of his bones, and he entered his discipleship with complete awe of the Master and his woman. For months he toiled at their direction, learning each day some greater measure of the power that was theirs, learning of the power and making it his own.

The woman. Qetura was her name. She of the green and yellow cat eyes, eyes which watched him and knew—of his personal ambition, and of his deep yearnings. Yearnings to possess her for himself.

"You do yourself no favor by attempting to court my good will," she told him upon the only occasion when she deigned to notice him as a person at all. "If anything you earn ill will."

His face had become flushed at this treatment. As if he were some youth in his teens! When he regained a measure of composure, he spoke up on his own behalf: "Is it, then, such a bad thing to be treated with the deference I show you? Is my loyalty something to be spurned, oh Qetura?"

Her face showed no emotion—none—when she answered him. "I ask not for your loyalty nor your deference, Herak. Your loyalty and deference should be directed toward him whom you serve."

"But," he pressed, "if you and I both serve the same Master, may not you and I, having this one bond already, have the additional bond of friendship?"

"I wish not your friendship, Herak. For in truth it is not friendship you offer. You are a member of

the Master's household because you can be of use to him. I therefore must teach you certain arts—skills which, although you will not see them this way, will prove dangerous to you. Your future, Herak, is not clear to me. It is strangely murky, oddly dark. If I could now influence my Master, I would have him put you out of this place, move you far from our work. But the work is of such importance that he would not listen to me, even though it was myself who persuaded him to accept you. May the powers protect you, Herak. I fear your end will be most unpleasant.”

Ubenk em xut, ubent em xut . . .

The words of control, the monitoring words. Herak remembered now when he first heard them, remembered the Master's foreboding explanation:

“It is some thousand years that the dark world has moved from the realm of this planet, but still its powers can be felt here upon our earth. I failed to destroy them once—those who dwell on that globe of death. But I was too eager, too unprepared. Let that be a lesson to you who wish for power. When dealing with the unknown forces, make certain that you have made no mistake. One error, one miscalculation no matter how small, and untold horror can be your fate!”

Herak had applied himself diligently at his work and at his studies of the new knowledge. The secrets of the universe were as food to his brain even when the truths his intellect accepted readily sent his soul into a type of frozen shock. The nature of the Master, for example . . .

How long the Master had lived! At least a thousand years! And the dark secret which sustained his immortality! His necessity for keeping

from the sun's light—the white rays of Ra would turn him to a wispy ether! And that further necessity:

Blood!

Human blood, extracted gently from the priestesses of the household. From their very throats—with lengthened teeth!

A mystery: the woman, too, had lived for long. But she had not her lord's need for blood sustenance. Why was that? Why was she not the same kind of monster as him whom she served? So many mysteries.

The gold was another such mystery.

It had been the gold which had first brought him to the city. He had heard tales of the great temple which held more gold than a place of legend. He had traveled across the sands to the great oasis, seeking the place, not for any apprenticeship, not for any service, not for any kind of knowledge.

Herak had come to steal.

And, although thievery still was part of the young man's plan, it was knowledge he was going to steal. And once he had the great secrets within his mind, and the gold still was available for the taking, so much the better.

The gold.

It had been in the form of coins, and jewelry and ornamental items of great value. But the Dark Master had caused it all to be melted down in great kilns and then fashioned into a strange device, long like a massive spear, but with odd configurations and symbols. The spear analogy was in one way very correct, Herak soon learned, be-

cause the huge golden device was in fact a weapon.

A weapon against the old ones.

"This," the Master said, when the time had come for Herak to be deemed worthy to enter the high tower, the roof of which, through some mechanical contrivance, opened soundlessly to the stars, "this has taken much time and effort to assemble. Used wrongly, it will be dangerous. *They* perhaps will destroy *us*. But not if we do what we must with precision. So listen, Herak, and learn. But do nothing on your own—*nothing!*"

So he had listened, he had learned. And then, on a night when the proud bitch Qetura had rebuffed his advances once more, he decided he would show her—and him as well. He had learned perhaps more than the Master had thought. The words of power.

Aaa nerau sexem sexemu. Tak peha hert ent heh set ent hesiu . . .

The words. So important. And the blood as well. Taken from a virgin girl, placed in the mirror finish of the special golden bowl which itself stood in the center of the slightly raised floor altar between the red-glass beakers . . .

Samaa em xu, sepsiager nu Neterzert pera hensen er maa neferuk . . .

A pity that the girl had to be slain, but it would not do to have her cry out and warn the Master or his woman-slave, and Herak was gentle with the silver pin he had thrust through the back of her skull. A beautiful girl, too, she was. One that he'd thought could be put to better use. But there could be time for that later—later when his mastery was complete enough to depart this land

with the wealth it held. There would be other lands, other girls. As for this one, she had not seen her death coming, had not felt its impact other than perhaps the one white-hot explosion of flame before the black shroud blotted out the world and its feelings. She could not have felt his taking of the needed blood from her throat . . .

Ubenk em xut, ubenk em xut . . .

The words. The blood. The mirror-bowl in which the blood broiled. Broiled and then smoothed out in its blackness, so that the surface of liquid was as flawless as the interior of the container which held it. And then—

The dark world. *The planet of blood!*

Mirrored there in the glass-smooth liquid were the stars which shone down through the opened tower, but among those stars was something else, something which could not be seen with the naked eye, nor with any glass magnifier devised by man. Only by this method could it—

It.

It seemed to pulse, like some gigantic heart of some primeval monster. From dark to darker, from red to black, its coloration changed—its coloration or that of the liquid, it was difficult to tell. It seemed to dim the surrounding spheres of light which Herak knew the great stars to be. It was as if that dark pulsating ball were drawing the very light from the stars to feed itself, much like the Master here on earth drew the essence of life from the blood of other humans. He was not human like the source of his sustenance, just as that dark ball was not a star like those upon which it fed on its path—its outward path which—

And then suddenly Herak felt it.

The pure, unadulterated *force* which seemed to be collecting in the golden bowl of blood before his eyes, which seemed to know he was there looking at it through half-dazed eyes—a force which seemed to permeate the very enclosure of the tower, which seemed to be thick and suffocating, which—

One error, one miscalculation no matter how small, and untold horror can be your fate!

He screamed as he jerked his eyes from the surface of the frothing fluid, jerked them upward to the sky, then screamed again as the white-hot ball of fire shot from the very heavens themselves—shot downward with the speed of telepathic power, shot downward directly toward the dark tower where a young man screamed, where Herak was screaming.

And then the collision. A burning sensation. The walls crumbling, the golden weapon bursting into flames.

A sensation of being crushed, squeezed.

A sensation of death.

But not death.

He screamed again, and heard his own scream fade into nothingness before he had completed it.

A ripping, tearing sound.

Another silent scream.

And he—

His body. Where had it gone? Somehow, although *he* had no eyes, he could *see* his body. It appeared to be stuck to something on the rounded walls which were above him.

But there had been no rounded walls above

him. Certainly, there had been no walls of this nature—red and glassy . . .

And then, suddenly, he knew. There had been those red stone beakers on the altar . . .

Silently, he screamed.

Later, they came. The two of them, the Master and the woman. He cried out to them, knowing somehow that he had been buried within his prison beneath mounds of rubble, knowing however that if he could find the right key *she* could hear him, could rescue him. And she herself, with her own words implying the same—

“He is somewhere here.” So loud her voice boomed, but *his* roared like an enraged animal which has just been calmed down:

“Perhaps. Perhaps not. He called them to him. In doing so, he has defeated my work. Let his fate be what they have decreed. You and I—we will prepare again, and then we will await their coming.”

And the soul of Herak knew they were going away.

Again, he screamed. He screamed for a long time, but he remained trapped where he was.

For six thousand years!

He gazed now into the pool of blood. The words had been spoken, all correctly. The stars were reflected upon the dark red surface, but they were reflected precisely as he could see them with his naked eye.

Somberly, he stood and walked to the side of the bed where the girl was tied.

“You have lied. Your blood is not that of a virgin. I shall have my virgin blood. But—but yours

will suffice for another need I feel this night.”

The knife flashed. The girl moved to avoid it, unsuccessfully.

And, steeling himself against the hated taste, Herak drank from the dead girl’s throat.

CHAPTER 6

"The Egyptian police are not noted for their swiftness," Professor Tarraf said apologetically.

Harmon frowned, but his voice was not harsh. "I find, Professor, that the police of most nations are equal in their responses to a crisis. Such a thing as this is not uncommon in my own land."

He was referring to the fact that just after nightfall, just when he was preparing to release the sliver from the Count's heart, he and Cam were called from their tent by Tarraf. With him already were the Romanian, Thorka, and Ktara.

"It is a small thing," the Egyptologist said. "The police would like to confer with us on the matter. They wish to know specifically how you as experts would suggest they deal with the investigation. It should not take long."

"But it just might," Ktara said quickly. "And, since it appears we must drive to the local station—which is some miles distant—I suggest that you perhaps might want to complete what you were doing inside the tent."

Cam and Harmon exchanged glances. "If Jenny is coming with us—" Cam began.

"No," Tarraf broke in. "Our vehicle is small and will not accommodate all of us—and the presence

of we five has been requested. Miss Jennifer will have to remain in camp. That should not represent any hardship to her. She seems to enjoy sifting through the relics we have unearthed."

Harmon looked at Ktara. "In that case, I believe it's best that I wait before taking the action you refer to."

"Action?" Tarraf asked.

"On a piece of equipment we brought with us," Cam explained.

Thorka smiled. "A special piece of equipment, I assume?"

Cam nodded. "The only kind we have. We travel light, Doctor."

Tarraf had been right about Jenny's not being concerned about being left behind—she was in fact enjoying being shown all the artifacts the party had collected prior to the death business—but he was wrong about how long matters at the police station would take.

It seemed that the head man was nowhere to be found. It also seemed that no one would make the effort to go and look for him. Ktara explained why in a whisper to Harmon:

"They believe he is with his paramour, and they are correct—or so the vibrations of this office suggest. If that is so, we are in for a longer wait than we may have bargained for."

"The chief is that potent a lover?" Harmon asked.

"The chief is that *impotent* a lover," she replied. "But that doesn't stop the man from trying—for hours at a stretch. I suggest that you release my Master. If we miss the hours of the night—"

"If we miss the hours of the night, we simply will have to miss them. My niece is in that camp. I'll not take the chance—"

"The chance. Every hour that Herak is loose, the chance—the real chance—gains odds. Professor Harmon, I implore you—"

It was Thorka who broke in. "What are you two whispering about with such animation?"

Ktara's reply to the Romanian was very close to an imperious snub:

"A matter of scholarship, Doctor. In a field Professor Harmon and I have studied together."

Harmon kept his voice low as before, but there was solidity in it:

"I'm sorry. The answer is no. Why should it be otherwise? You—you and your Master—have not yet deigned to tell Cam and me what all this is about. You speak of danger. All right, that was enough to get us from New York to these desert sands—"

"That and your own curiosity," she corrected.

"Very well, but that and my own curiosity are not enough to turn our dark friend loose—not until I know more about this so-called threat."

"I have written of it."

"In your *Runes*? Herak's two lines tell me little."

"And the lines just previous?"

Harmon had the habit of always carrying the small book with him. A great deal of it he had committed to memory, but now he took it from a safari shirt pocket and opened it to the Herak reference. He had read the preceding lines before, several times. He read them again:

*The time was right.
In darkest night
They moved from Earth's domain.
Soon they'd be far
From the sunlight star
And free from their golden bane.
The time was right.
It had to be.
And readiness was near.
Then Herak tried
Then Herak died
And they had no more to fear.*

“Their golden bane,” Harmon said. “I should have made the connection. They are the ones who destroyed the first land. The old gods or old ones who—”

He stopped, turning the page toward the beginning of the book, to the descriptions of the destruction of that first land which some men called Eden and others Atlantis, and the escape of Ktara and her Black Master. A passage told of the Master's furious effort to save his land—and himself—through a curious method linked, Harmon knew, to Count Dracula's hidden hordes of gold:*

*The quickly fashioned arrow-mold
Received its molten gift of gold.
When hardened, cast was broken free.
“And now we make our own decree!”
The Master said, and climbed the tower,
Misjudging Fate and the old gods' power.*

*See DRACULA'S GOLD, DRACULA'S LOST WORLD

So, then, in this place in ancient Egypt, he had tried again—no, somehow this Herak tried—*Then Herak tried, then Herak died—*

What had Ktara said this afternoon? About the stars:

They may well drip blood.

There was, in the verses she composed, a similar thought, similar words. Yes—he found them, in connection with the mysterious second time she had once before refused to explain:

*It will come,
That second time,
And the heavens' blood
will drip as wine.
Prepare! Prepare!
He must not err.
Not the next time.
But when?
When will the next time,
The second time—
The final time?
When will it come?*

They—whoever they were—had been here. Then they had gone. They would return. That was the second time. Yet, if Harmon interpreted the Herak passage properly, Dracula and Ktara had tried again—here in Egypt—to defeat them before they reached a point too far. A point which was far—

*From the sunlight star
And free from their golden bane.
They—*

It had to be—
They were on another world!

Harmon slammed the book shut, then suddenly another thought came to him. In all the pages of the woman's writings there was but one reference to something which might be another world. He found the place easily. It had been a line he had thought to be completely out of context, but now . . .

She had been talking about a new land they had visited, perhaps in the early twelfth century—

*The grass and trees are fresh and green
The air is clean and light.
But well I know this cannot last.
The blood world brings the night.*

Harmon had thought it was no more than simile, a reference to the sense of darkness which comes with the darkness of night. He should have known better. Ktara's verses were crisp and clean and cryptic.

"The blood world," he said to her softly. But his eyes held her gaze.

She, in turn, did not flinch. "I have never underestimated your intelligence, Professor Harmon. I see that my judgment of you is not mistaken."

"You will tell me of them—the old gods?"

"No. That is not my station to do. I hope you need not be told, ever. I hope that the time is not approaching."

"But you fear it is—am I right?"

"I fear, Professor Harmon, that unless Herak is

found and neutralized before he again can attempt that which he attempted before, the day of horror may be hastened."

"The day," Harmon repeated. "The second time."

She smiled grimly. "The day. When the stars drip blood."

When the chief of police finally showed up, he showed up staggering. Harmon was about to make the observation to Ktara that the man certainly seemed to work hard in overcoming his sexual problem when the real cause of the man's stumbling became obvious to him. The chief of police evidently drank during his love bouts, quite a bit. He was drunk.

He was also pompous and loud and ineffectual, three traits he demonstrated in his first question to the group in the outer office:

"Well, what is it you wish to see me about?"

After it was pointed out—by Professor Tarraf—that *he* had expressed a desire to see *them*, he had to be reminded of the subject matter he had expressed a desire to discuss. Halfway through the latter explanation, the chief sat down behind a scratched metal desk. Three quarters of the way through, Tarraf stopped.

The chief of police was asleep.

Thorka rose indignantly, but it was Tarraf who calmly told the officer in charge that he thought it best they call another time.

The officer looked doubtful, then he looked at his chief. "I suppose that, under the circumstances, it might be all right, yes."

Thorka was not the only one fuming as they

left the station house. Harmon was livid. He remained so during the hour's drive back to the camp, but his emotions changed rapidly once they arrived. The camp was in an uproar of its own.

Three policemen were dead. Four girls were missing. One of them was the American, Miss Harmon.

Jenny Harmon had spent her first day at the site in a state of sheer excitement. The artifacts the Egyptian girls had shown her were, for the most part, in excellent condition. It was as if the city—or village or whatever the site had once held—had been suddenly buried by some mighty cataclysmic force. But wandering around the dig itself was the most exciting part of her day. To think of it—below her feet as she walked, as each foot touched the sand, might be something which could be of so great an importance as to rock the scholarly world, perhaps even to change civilization's view of its own history. That the writing which had been uncovered so far was as yet indecipherable, she knew already. What if—what if—something like the Rosetta stone was down there, something which compared the unknown language with what had previously been considered ancient Egyptian?

Even the horrible events of the previous days had not contained the enthusiasm of the young people on the dig—although they told her that Professor Tarraf was extremely concerned that they might release something even more terrible than whatever it was that had been set loose. But as long as they had to remain at the site, he allowed them to continue working—very carefully,

as he had admonished them. And carefully they worked, not only because of the possibility of the dangers he spoke of, but because he had taught them well in the business of uncovering the past.

In the days following the strange deaths of Mahmoud and Samiha and the disappearance of Hashim, the young people remaining at the site seemed to shrug off those events. Already, some "natural" theories were being discussed—Jenny was not clear as to whether the ideas had come from the students originally or whether they were first explanations offered by the police. One of the theories had it that Mahmoud was not a stable person to begin with, and the heat of the desert finally caused his mind to snap. As for Samiha, Hashim murdered her and took off across the sands. After all, they were lovers, and lovers have arguments. And lovers' arguments often end in violent death, do they not? A second theory had the two young men as rivals for the favors of Samiha, which accounted for Mahmoud's attack on Hashim and the latter's killing the girl. Discounted in all of this was the strange way Mahmoud's body looked after he had been shot, so additions to the theories posited that he had somewhere contracted a strange disease which caused that effect or, alternatively, that the body hadn't really looked as bad as observers remembered it. The second alternative seemed on the surface to be an odd one, in that the photographs taken of Mahmoud in death looked worse than the descriptions Jenny heard. But even here, there was talk of possible "exaggeration due to the harsh lighting of the desert sun" and other visual effects.

As to the body having been stolen, this coin-

cided nicely with the Mahmoud-Hashim rivalry theory. Muslims are quite particular as to the way in which they wish to be buried. Perhaps to Hashim's mind, he could do Mahmoud no greater evil than to leave the young man's shell of flesh to lie unknown on the sands, prey to the elements and to the vermin which could more easily feed upon the dead.

Jenny listened to all the theories, but she had her doubts. Probably there was some logical, rational, and natural explanation for what had taken place here. Yet there were two reasons why she was not as firm in her belief as the others. First, she herself had experienced the impossible—or what she had thought at the time to have been the impossible. And it almost had cost her her life.* Second, her uncle had come to investigate. Jenny Harmon was not certain what her uncle was doing these days, but he had a penchant for what other people like to call “the unknown” and, also, he had demonstrated—at least to her—that he could handle it. He and Cam and—be-
grudgingly—the dark Ktara.

Ktara. Why did Jenny not like her? Was it because she was beautiful in a way which Jenny herself could not be? Or was it because she seemed to treat Jenny as someone too young and inexperienced to deem worthy of respect? No. It wasn't either of those things. In the first place, Jenny had enough confidence in herself to accept—without undue self-flattery—that she herself was quite attractive. In the second place, Ktara

*See *THE DRUMS OF DRACULA*

had always treated Jenny courteously. What it was—

It was that the dark woman in black—always in black—did have a wisdom which Jenny could not help but feel, a wisdom which somehow Jenny knew she would never have, regardless of how long she studied, regardless of how long she lived. That, and something else.

Jenny Harmon simply did not like the way men looked at Ktara. Correction: One man. Cam Sanchez.

Was it really true, then? Was Jenny Harmon in love with Cam—Cameron—Sanchez?

How many times she had asked herself that question! How many times had she been unable to answer it. No, that wasn't quite true. The fact was that each time the question came up, she avoided it. She thought of his age, thought of her career goals—whatever they might be at the time. Yet she knew one fact clearly. When the honors program allowed her freedom away from the college classroom, she headed for Westhampton. For her uncle's book collection, yes, that was a valid reason. But the *real* reason?

She chose not to think about it. Especially now, when there were so many other stimulating things to think about.

Like what *really* had happened on this archaeological site.

Like what remained to be discovered under the sand.

Like what had been discovered shortly before her own arrival here today.

It had been an extraordinary find. Even Professor Tarraf's interest had been kindled, according

to the girls who showed it to Jenny. But he had insisted that only the surface of the thing be uncovered. Under no circumstance—none—was any of them to attempt to dig beneath the cover of the thing or try to pry it open.

The thing.

It was a sarcophagus, a large stone casket which was long enough for several bodies. One of the young men told Jenny that there could be at least fifteen corpses in the thing. "The Professor is right, though," he said. "The responsibility for opening it is his. If, that is, he chooses to open it."

"Why would he not want to open it?" she asked. "Because of the trouble here?"

The young man shook his head. "The seal is tight on the stone lid. Even if it once were not, the many years it has been beneath the sands have made it so. The problem is air. Often, when it is introduced after centuries, it has an unfortunate effect."

Jenny understood. It was somewhere in the Holy Land, wasn't it?—where several papyrus scrolls were discovered in a sealed cave, and when the cave was opened, the substance crumbled to what was almost dust. Thus special laboratories had been equipped for the handling of such finds when they were made.

But, even so, even though the great stone crypt could not be opened now, she would be there when it was opened. She was sure of it. Professor Tarraf would opt to raise the lid right here, she was certain of it.

She was partly right. The crypt was going to be opened here, and she would be on the scene when

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it was. But Professor Tarraf would have absolutely no say in the matter.

It was sometime after midnight, the exact time she didn't know. In a sense Jenny's body was weary as she lay fully clothed upon the cot in the tent she had been assigned to share with Ktara, but her mind still was churning actively, keeping her from the sleep that the jet-lag from her flight across the Atlantic demanded of her mind and body. The lantern, which rested upon a rickety wooden chair to the side of her cot, had been extinguished for what must have been at least an hour when she heard the sound that disturbed her train of thought.

She sat up and concentrated. There was nothing now, no sound. Nothing at all. The camp was completely still—*deathly still* were the words that came to her. The moonlight shining through the slits in the tent front looked pale and ghostly—that might have been part of the uneasy feeling she felt coming over her, but it wasn't the entire reason.

There should be some movement out there. There were policemen with rifles walking around the perimeter of the dig and the campsite. There had been at least three of them, and she remembered hearing their footfalls earlier. Had they stopped now? Taken some kind of break, probably unauthorized?

Briefly she wondered why it was that her uncle and Cam—and, yes, Ktara—had not yet returned. But that wonder was very brief, because no sooner had it entered her mind than she heard the sound again.

The sound. The same sound she had heard before, she was certain of it.

A muffled beginning, a cut-short smothered sound of a human voice—one which might have just begun a cry of surprise, or a cry for help. Or a scream.

A chill of danger went through the girl's system. But with it an alertness came to all her senses, and a calmness which her spirit owed to its Harmon heritage. There was something happening outside her tent, something harmful. So be it. If she were going to face it, and her frame of mind was now such that she knew she would, she would do so with her wits about her. And, if possible, on her own terms.

Silently, she slipped off the cot and moved to the rear of the tent. Her uncle's tent was to the right of her own. All the equipment that had been brought with them was stored there, except for her personal things, which she'd kept with her. It was not the equipment so much she was interested in, but she'd seen some of the things that had gone into her uncle's and Cam's luggage. One item in particular, which Cam had packed, was now foremost in her mind. The item had not been found upon their entry into Egypt because they had VIP treatment as soon as their plane landed and there was no baggage search whatever.

Cam's revolver.

It was a big heavy-looking thing, but to Jenny all firearms were big and heavy. The point was that it probably was still in his bag. And if it was frightening enough for her to handle, it surely would be frightening enough for anyone who

might have cause to stare down the wrong end of the thing.

She moved cautiously, carefully opening the rear flap of her tent and stopping to listen. All quiet. As *death*. She stepped out into the moonlight, her insides wanting to move with haste, her mind insisting that silence was more important than speed. Caution . . . care . . . step by step . . . eyes taking in all the surroundings and spotting no movement other than her own, ears strained but hearing no sound other than her own breathing. And then the rear flap to the other tent, the flap and its undoing—and then inside, with a short sigh of relief.

Cam's bag. Lying just to the left of that large, long crate, that mysterious container of her uncle's "equipment." But the bag. Yes, snapping it open, rooting through Cam's shirts and trousers and socks and—

The gun.

Heavy, yes, heavier than she'd thought possible, but it was in fact a .357 Magnum Python, and those things come heavy—mainly so they won't fall apart when the slam of detonation sends the powerful slug through its barrel.

The gun. Loaded, as even she, a novice in such matters, could see merely by looking at the cylinder and the copper-colored bullet-ends which shone back in the moonlight.

The gun. A weapon. A passport to discover the cause of that muffled sound—or those muffled sounds—she'd heard.

She opened the front of the tent.

And gasped.

"I'm sorry," the young man said. Dark and

handsome, like so many of these young Egyptians, she thought. He smiled at her, not seeing the gun which somehow now was held tightly behind her back.

"I really am sorry. I seem to have startled you—and interrupted your sleep as well."

"I—" Jenny began. "Er, who—I mean, who are you? I don't remember seeing—"

"Ah, Miss Harmon, there's no reason to fear—"

"You know my name. How do you—"

His smile. It was so reassuring. Yet—*yet*—"I don't know you," she said.

"There is no reason you should, Miss Harmon. He stepped nearer to the tent opening. "As I already have said, I am sincerely sorry for having awakened you. But now that you are awake, I hope you don't mind if I ask you a question which you might find somewhat personal. Miss Harmon, are you a virgin?"

"Am I *what*?"

His eyes looked completely innocent. "A virgin, Miss Harmon. Are you pure or are you not? Ah—please don't, Miss Harmon. Please do not attempt to use that weapon you have behind you. In the first place, you have no idea how to handle it. In the second, you would never get it into a position to use it on myself. My friend, Mahmoud, would see to that. He stands very close to you now."

Jenny had seen enough cowboy movies of the old school to know the ploy, but the trouble was—

The trouble was, for the past two seconds or so, she had felt that there was someone—or something—behind her.

The corner of her eye caught it—and it was an *it*—first. Then she turned, lifting the big Magnum

up to the dried-out, horrible face which would have caused her to shriek for all she was worth if it had had the time to impact fully upon her. But the time wasn't there. No sooner had she turned than she knew it was all over. Something hard and heavy slammed into the back of her head, and the moon which had brightened the night blinked once and then went out.

Herak issued his command, and the rockhard body of what had once been a young Egyptian bent down and cradled the unconscious girl in its arms. Herak himself was about to move from the tent when he noticed the thing along one of its sides.

The long crate. There was something about it . . .

He knew that he should not stay too long within the camp, but he had this . . . feeling . . .

He also knew that he should be silent, but nonetheless—

With a frantic effort, he tore the top from the crate. Beneath the plain wooden slats—

Was a coffin.

Was it possible that—

No!

Yet . . .

Yet it would take only a little time to lift that coffin lid, just one or two seconds . . .

But he didn't want to. No, suppose he found there what he dreaded he would find. Suppose—

But suppose what he dreaded really was there, and he didn't look? Then he'd have no idea whether or not the threat which he now imagined was there or—

He had to know!

Gently, he lifted the coffin lid.

And just barely contained his scream.

Like a machine that could do nothing except what it was programmed to do, he fell upon his knees before the closed eyes and somehow mocking face of the Master. After all these years . . .

The Master was here—*here!*

Here, but impotent. Yet it was night! It was the time of his power. How was it that he just lay there, not moving . . .

And then Herak concentrated upon the crate and the coffin and the body within it. Using the skills he had learned long ago from the woman he called Qetura—the skills which bit by bit were coming back to him—he sifted the vibrations within the tent. It took less than a full minute for him to have the story, or as much of it as he deemed necessary. The mental pictures of the old man in the wheelchair and the gigantic assistant—and of the woman in black—were fixed in his mind.

“So you know I have returned, do you?” he said with venom in his voice. “Once more you would consign me to an unkind fate. Yet this time you shall not find it easy. This time . . .”

Softly, he closed the coffin lid. He considered replacing the top of the crate, then discarded the idea. No, there was more important work to be done.

The two rock men stood waiting in one of the digging areas. At their feet were the unconscious forms of four young girls, all but Jenny dressed scantily in thin nightwear.

Herak smiled. Perhaps this Jenny—or Jennifer

—would be the one. It would be ironic if that were to be the case, would it not? In any event, he wanted all four of the girls. There would have to be a virgin among them. And besides, before he was finished he would need a goodly quantity of blood, both pure and impure. Yet, four girls and three pairs of arms to carry them . . .

He moved from that part of the dig to another pit. He gazed down at the broken bodies of the three policemen who had been walking guard duty and whose faces each held the frozen lines of horror. Perhaps they would do—

And then something in the air distracted him. Over to his right was something sending out strange psychic signals. He moved closer to it.

The long sarcophagus.

Herak smiled as his mind formulated the power and moved a wave of energy from within his skull to the exterior surface of the great crypt. He looked within. Yes. This was better, much better.

He returned to where the girls lay. It took only ten seconds to extract the amount of blood he needed from one of the Egyptians, then he was back at the long stone burial place.

Then came the words and the placing of blood.

Then movement within the sarcophagus.

There were eleven of them. They had been priests once. They had lain in state for more than six thousand years. None of them had been mummified, since there was no need. This priesthood had developed fluids which kept the body in almost perfect condition without the need for anything other than three injections, one in the base of the skull, the second in the heart, and the third in the lower stomach.

But as they stood beside their stone casket in their rotted raiment, Herak saw that the fluids had not been as perfect as they were touted to be. The once-fair priests were misshapen and gnarled, their faces contorted into an almost non-human ugliness, their spines and limbs twisted into odd angles. Areas of their flesh were turned into hard calcium much like the bones which lay under the skin surface.

"Ah, my priests and servants," Herak said to the bulging eyes and blank twisted faces. "It is a cruel world which you left once and to which you have returned, a world in which nothing retains its perfection."

And yet that was not quite true. As he issued his mental commands and the eleven whom he'd awakened moved in shuffling formation to where the other two of Herak's servants waited with the girls, Herak knew that there were some things which had spanned the centuries without change.

One of them was his hatred for the one who had been his Master.

And now, as his army of terror began to move from the campsite, four of them carrying their unconscious burdens, Herak's eyes rested briefly on the tent that contained the figure of the one he hated.

"This time, Master, I shall follow the advice you once gave me. This time I shall prepare . . . carefully."

CHAPTER 7

"How long ago?"

Harmon's voice was heavy. He and Cam and Ktara were in his tent. The discovery of the dead policemen had sent Tarraf and Thorka back to civilization again, which Harmon deemed fortunate. He did not wish to have to operate clandestinely, not now, not with Jenny's life at stake. "How long has it been since they left here?"

Ktara told him. "Three hours. They have reached the place in which Herak dwells."

Cam looked at her. "You know where he is? Where Jenny is?"

"I know the general direction, and from traces of Herak's thoughts I know what the villa looks like, yes."

Cam had been seated on his cot. Now he jumped to his feet. "Then what are we waiting for?"

"We are waiting for Professor Harmon," Ktara replied. "We have few hours of darkness remaining, Professor."

Harmon nodded. What she said was true. He closed his eyes briefly.

Count Dracula rose from his place of rest.

It is said among the Bedouins who roam the sands that the desert is an alive thing, that it has eyes and ears, that it misses nothing which takes place in its expanse. It is also said that the desert cares little about what it sees and hears, especially of the affairs of men. Thus, while the desert is no friend to man, neither is it an enemy as long as it is treated with respect. The Bedouins know the sands, and they treat them with well-deserved awe. And the dunes, on their part, leave the respectful wanderers alone. Seeing and listening, yes, all the time. Missing nothing, but interfering rarely.

It also is said about the desert that nothing it sees or hears is surprising or new. The sands of the dunes are in fact the sands of time, and the cycles of man's progress and fall follow patterns the desert has known for eons.

These things may or may not be true. Yet, if the desert does have eyes to see, surely it had been centuries since it had seen the strange creature that flew above it this night in the light of stars and moon. And if it does have ears to hear, surely it had not heard for eons the steady sound of movement the creature made as its leathery wings pounded the still air of the silvery night.

The huge bat flew almost due east, its bright red eyes reflecting a singularity of purpose, its directional mechanisms bringing its flight directly onto target. The brightly painted villa poured out little in the way of light from its interior, yet there was evidence of activity going on inside. And outside as well. The outer walls, for example—

The flying creature suddenly swerved in its flight, soaring upward with furiously beating

wings, straight upward and slightly to the west now. Then, moving still higher into the sky, it again flattened and moved toward the villa, but this time slowly, cautiously—passing over the exterior wall and progressing as far as the wall of the house itself. There on the roof—

The flight was again interrupted. It was as if some invisible hand from the sky had reached down and jerked the creature sharply upward. Accompanying the movement was a high-pitched shriek which was perhaps a cry of pain, or one of rage.

Within moments, the flying creature was retracing its flight—back to the west.

Daylight came with full bright force to the archaeological camp. Within Harmon's tent the crate was sealed. There had been little time for discussion when the Count returned, but all the necessary information was communicated quickly between the Master and the woman in black. For the benefit of Harmon and Cam, she summarized the communication succinctly:

"The mark of the cross. Herak has fortified the villa and its outer walls against my Master."

Cam slowly clicked the cylinder of the .357 Python. "We have faced that obstacle before."

"Yes," she said. "I will go with you."

Cam said nothing as he began to move toward the opening of the tent. Harmon, however, did have something to say. To Ktara. But she tried to cut it off before it began.

"Your niece is in danger, Professor."

"I understand that fully. I also understand that there is much you are keeping from me."

"I have said all I intend to about Herak," she told him.

"Then do not speak of Herak, but speak of the stone sarcophagus."

"It is empty," she said.

"It is empty now," Harmon corrected. "What was in it?"

"Professor—"

Harmon looked at the Puerto Rican. "Tell her what you found."

Cam's eyes went from Harmon's to Ktara's. Before he could begin, he knew that she knew. But he said it anyway. "Tracks. I had a look around the approaches to the camp. I've found three sets of tracks coming in. Going out, however, there were more. Several more."

"But the girls—"

"More than four more," Cam interrupted. "And the new tracks weren't those of girls."

Harmon's voice was cold. "What was in the sarcophagus?"

Ktara told them. "I did not wish to worry you unduly. These creatures that Herak has restored to life can be handled." She looked again at Cam. "Now, Mr. Sanchez. Unless, of course, it is desired to lose more time in idle talk."

Talking their way into getting one of the police Land Rovers might have been difficult, but one smile from Ktara worked wonders. Cam knew, of course, that the smile had nothing to do with it. It was her mental power that caused the official in charge to offer them all courtesies. Once he began guiding the Rover across the sands, however, Cam's own courtesy changed into something less than that.

"Idle talk, that's what you called it. Lady, you never cease to amaze me. I don't have to have your mind-reading ability to know what the professor is going through—or is it that all of your powers blind you to the plain evidence of human emotion?"

She thought over what she was going to say before she said it. "Mr. Sanchez, I can read human emotion somewhat better than you give me credit for doing. The professor's psychological make-up—"

"Is as hard as nails. If he hasn't proved that in the months you've known him, then you're completely blind."

"Yes, Professor Harmon has an iron will and an unshakable spirit. But when his niece is in danger, as she is now—"

"You forget that she's been in danger before,"

Her nostrils flared. "I forget nothing! The plain truth, Mr. Sanchez, is that she's never been in this kind of danger before."

Cam's mouth screwed up. Hell, the girl had almost died . . . But then the thought came to him, and he was not sure whether it was his own or Ktara's. He voiced it:

"There are things worse than death."

"Far worse, Mr. Sanchez."

He was quiet for a time, his senses drinking in the sight of the morning desert, the sounds of the wheels and the Rover motor. "All right. I'm not the professor. It also occurs to me that I ought to have some idea what I'm going to be facing on this bright sunny day. I know you like to play games with the professor, letting him sweat over the interpretation of your verses, but it seems to

me his reading of what's happening—and what happened all those years ago with Herak—is logical, coming as it does from your own words. You yourself have said, in my presence, that whatever it is Herak is trying to do can have an earth-shattering effect. So why is it—”

“I do not play games, Mr. Sanchez. I had hoped that by now you would understand this. The information I am allowed to reveal is strictly limited. I have in fact encouraged the professor in his reading of my lines. I would like him to understand as much of what I speak of as possible. As to his present deductions about Herak, he is for the most part correct, just as you are correct when you speak of the seriousness of the situation. Earth shattering. An excellent term, and fully descriptive, although in a way you cannot hope to understand.”

“Try me.”

“I will speak only of what you may face.”

“Speak of Jenny first. What is the thing worse than death which she faces?”

“Do you believe in the soul, Mr. Sanchez? Do you, in other words, believe that there is a part of each person which is immortal?”

In his earlier years Cam Sanchez would have answered no, at least in his own mind. The official answer, especially when you were brought up by a hardrock Roman Catholic grandmother who thought that all science was nothing more than man's vanity, was decidedly affirmative. But in his younger years Cam had dismissed religion—all religion—as little more than a calming influence upon those who knew that death was lurking at the end of their allotted span of years.

So he thought—up to almost a year ago. But now his eyes had seen some of the “dark mansions” his old *abuela* had spoken of, they had been startled—and terrorized—at the sight of the scientifically “impossible.” He had witnessed Evil with a capital E.

And today, this very day as he guided a Land Rover across ancient sands, a silver cross hung from a chain around his neck.

“Immortality?” he repeated. “I guess the Count could be called immortal—and you. And this Herak, in a way—”

“No, that’s not what I mean. Not immortality that way, but in a way all humans experience.”

He smiled in spite of himself. “I’m afraid I haven’t yet experienced immortality.”

“You are not yet dead, Mr. Sanchez.”

No, he thought to himself, *but I’ve come pretty damned close!*

She, too, smiled. “All right. Let us say, for the sake of argument, that there is such a thing as an individual human soul. Let us say that certain things are experienced by that soul-thing after what we call death takes place. Let us also say that these things can be pleasant, that they can be a kind of limbo-void, or they can be unpleasant—excruciatingly unpleasant.”

Cam nodded. “Okay, let’s say all that, and then let’s get on to what I thought we were going to talk about. Jenny.”

Ktara’s voice was heavy. “That’s what we are talking about, Mr. Sanchez. We’re talking about the fact that, if Herak is not stopped, the soul—or whatever you choose to call it—of Jennifer

Harmon will be in excruciating and horrible torture. For what might well be an eternity, Mr. Sanchez—an *eternity*."

She looked directly at him. "Now, is that something you think Professor Harmon should be told?"

"He has a right to—"

"He has a right to nothing! Jennifer has the right to live—or at the least to die in some clean and concrete way! She needs her uncle with all his mental faculties, including clear thinking! Otherwise, she might well be lost. Do I make myself clear, Mr. Sanchez?"

"Clear," he said gruffly. "But what is it Herak is trying to do that puts Jenny in that kind of danger? All he seems to be doing is what you—and the Count—were trying to do. Destroy that dark world, as you call it. I'm not clear on that, myself, but—"

"Herak does not wish to destroy the dark world, nor those who dwell upon it. If he was once our ally, he no longer is. He harbors great hatred toward the Master and myself. If he now feels he can frustrate the Master's work, perhaps by attempting to join forces with the old ones—"

"If? Perhaps? That doesn't sound much like you," Cam observed. "How is it, with your abilities, you aren't more sure of what you're saying?"

"There's a very simple explanation for that, Mr. Sanchez. As an apprentice to my Master, Herak was taught several skills. He acquired several powers. His mind can penetrate the minds of others, as can mine. Like mine, his mind can block penetration. He has done so."

"All right. One more question now. How do I go about killing this Herak?"

"You don't, Mr. Sanchez. You don't."

Cam didn't like the odds, but there wasn't much he could do about them.

The Land Rover was halted behind a high dune. On the top of the dune, Cam lay on his stomach, a pair of strong field glasses trained on the lonely villa. The cross symbols on the outer walls were plainly visible, and he had been told by Ktara approximately where the others could be found. As he saw it, the odds had him beat in two ways:

The first was a matter of timing. It was now close to high noon. Even if Cam were successful in obliterating all of the crosses, there would be plenty of time for Herak to make new symbols before nightfall. And Cam might be captured or killed in the meantime.

That was because of the second odds factor. The factor of numbers. There was himself and Ktara. Inside those walls there were Herak himself—who could not be killed—and thirteen others who had been "activated" as Herak's servants. The word was Ktara's, but he was mainly interested in its practical effect:

"Can they be killed?"

She briefly explained their nature, the two husks of bodies and the eleven priests. "Technically, they are dead already."

"All right. Let's be certain that we're technically correct," he had said through his teeth. "Can they be put out of commission?"

"The eleven priests, yes. The others—they are

stronger of body than any human being. But I think, yes, they can be subdued."

Still, though, thirteen of them. Not to mention Herak. And now as his eyes were focused upon the outer wall, Ktara repeated to him his own thoughts:

"Waiting until nightfall is one alternative. By that time—"

"I know. But by that time, what will Herak have done to Jenny?"

"Probably nothing. Nothing really harmful, in any case."

"Probably. Again probably."

"If—if he should begin the work for which he has taken Jenny, I will not miss the change in the atmosphere. That cannot be hidden from one who knows the signs, regardless of what powers Herak has. Normally, I would expect him to wait until the fall of night, when the time is more propitious. But he knows that the Master is near, and that may cause him to act more quickly—and perhaps less carefully."

"Quickly and less carefully. I take it those faults could also be applied to me?"

"No. You were right in your desire to get here as soon as possible. In the event action has to be taken. But now that we are here, perhaps the best alternative is the waiting one. If—"

But she stopped, seeing with her own eyes what Cam now was seeing through the field glasses. The outer gate in the wall had swung open. From the courtyard came two figures—

Their faces, their manner of hobbling-walking, their twisted frames said it all.

They were two of the priests from the sarcophagus.

They had come outside to work.

To embellish the cross-symbols on the outer walls.

They worked in three colors. Red, black, and a dark brown. With long brushes, they worked not swiftly but knowingly, as if they had had years of artistic practice. And as they worked, the two sets of two simple straight lines, one vertical and the other horizontal, began to grow into designs that were more and more complex—but were still basically the same simple symbol which was Dracula's nemesis.

"The cross," Dracula had said on more than one occasion, "is a symbol far older than those who follow your religion ever could imagine." He had not elaborated on what the real—or the original—meaning of the symbol was, but now as Cam watched the two misshapen figures from six thousand years in the past work their colors into the expanded design he knew the truth of the Count's statement. The cross symbol was anathema to Dracula not because it was connected to Christianity, but because it had been connected, far in the past, with something else. Cam was not sure that he ever wanted to know what that something else might be.

The two priests worked steadily, without pausing, without even stepping back for a look at their work from a greater perspective. For an hour they worked, and that hour became two, and the two, three. The sun was at its hottest now and, lying upon the dune where he had been for the past three hours, Cam felt that the water in his

body had totally evaporated. His shirt and trousers were soaked with sweat, those parts of his body that were exposed to the sun ached with redness. The wide-brimmed hat with sweat-soaked band was probably a lifesaver. He had brought it only for the sake of the eye-shading brim. Had he not brought it, his brains would have been boiled to steam long ago.

Ktara, on the other hand, seemed not to mind the heat at all. She was dressed in her usual black, and the only trace of discomfort Cam noticed was a slight furrowing of her brow. Even that was unusual, but its cause was not physical discomfort. It was a discomfort of a completely different kind.

"Mr. Sanchez, I believe it is time for a diversionary tactic of some kind. Herak has begun the drawing of the blood."

CHAPTER 8

“Yes, Master,” Jenny Harmon said. “I shall obey you. In every small detail, I shall obey you.”

She stood straight and erect, her right hand extended to receive the knife the young man was presenting to her. She could hear her own words and knew that they were the only ones with which she could respond. The *power* of his thoughts. He . . .

He stood before her in a strange outfit. A tunic, dark purple in color with a golden embroidered design at the chest. It had been made of material that had once been draperies. When she had arrived in this place the previous night, two women had been working at sewing machines, fashioning his garment and the flimsy white gowns that she and two of the other girls from the camp wore. The fourth girl was completely nude, and was lying upon the large bed in what appeared to be the master bedroom. She was thankful that this was the room to which she and the other girls were confined. In that other room, the one with the sewing machines—

The two women who had been working there were dead. Jenny had sensed it from her first sight of them, she did not know how or why. It was per-

haps the way they were working steadily, not pausing to give her so much as a look when the one who called himself Herak led Jenny and the other two girls into the room. Jenny knew there were other men about the place, but she had not yet seen them—other than the one in her uncle's tent, and she'd seen him only that once. Still, she knew he could not be alive. And once she had regained consciousness—abruptly, in the room with the two women at their machines—she remembered where she had seen that parchment-like face before. It had been in a photograph, and her uncle and Cam had said that it was a corpse of a young man.

A young man?

The thought made her shiver. But strangely it was her mind only which shivered, and only a part of it, a part deeply recessed behind her mental processes. But she knew that the two women who worked at the machines were dead—the living dead—and she was certain of it when Herak spoke to them.

"Very fine," he had said, examining the fabric they had completed. "Excellent. You may sleep now."

And immediately, both of them slumped over their machines. One of them let her hand slip under the needle which, continuing its throbbing beat, stitched black thread into unfeeling fingers before Herak switched the machine to stillness.

A cry had begun in Jenny's throat but it was stopped—halted before it reached the rear of her mouth—by one glance from the young man's eyes.

"There is no reason to be frightened. You are not frightened, are you?"

Yes! That's what she wanted to say, but already her mind was urging the opposite response—not from the fright she was denying, not from any determination to pretend, to give him the answer he wanted, but from an inability to do other than what he willed her to do. A *very real* inability.

"No, I am not afraid."

"And you have no reason to cry out."

"No, I have no reason to cry out."

"Thus you will not cry out, isn't that so?"

"Yes, that is so."

"You will do as I command you, will you not?"

"Yes, I will do as you command."

"Yes—*what?*"

His eyes burned into hers. At first, she didn't know what it was he expected of her. She had answered his question. She had answered it in the way his mental power had ordered her to. Then she understood.

"Yes . . . Master."

"Excellent. We shall get along splendidly, Jennifer. Now, I want you to disrobe for me. You will do that for me, won't you?"

"Yes, Master."

No! Part of her mind insisted that she would not do as he asked, that she would not act the part of some puppet on the end of a string. But even as the protest made itself known, she realized that her fingers already were unbuttoning the front of her blouse.

He laughed. "You need not be concerned, Jennifer. My intentions are pure—as regards your body. It is only that I want you to be properly attired for the ceremonies which are to come within the hours ahead. I want you to wear this." He

took a long white sheer gown from the sewing table, gently lifting one of the dead women's elbows to free it. "You will look lovely in it, do you agree?"

"It is as the Master says," Jenny replied.

"Good. While you are changing, I shall have the other girls prepared. I am certain it is all right to leave you here. You won't try to run away from me—will you, Jennifer?"

"No," she said. "There is nowhere I could run to escape from your eyes."

"That is so, Jennifer," he said with a smile. "How well you say the lines." His eyes lingered on her now nude body. "And . . . how well your figure is formed. Afterward—after my primary task is complete—I may have use for you. Do you know what I refer to, Jennifer?"

"Yes. My Master would make me his."

"In the body. Your mind already is mine, is that not true?"

"My mind is the Master's, yes."

"And your body? To whom does that belong?"

Suddenly Jenny felt the force that held her mind release its grasp. The presence—that foreign presence that had been directing her responses of body and mind—was gone.

Herak repeated the question. The look on his face said that he earnestly wanted to know. "To whom?" he asked again.

"To myself!" she snapped. And then she remembered the question he had asked her back at the campsite, and she knew what his current question really was seeking. In the pit of her stomach, she knew she should tread lightly, but she was, after all, a Harmon:

"Yes! I'm a virgin!" she said with disdain for the man who had questioned her. "But that should be no problem for one like you, who would not find rape difficult to square with your conscience. In fact I'm surprised you haven't already deflowered a couple of ten-year-olds by now. That would be your style, wouldn't—"

But she could say no more. The clamp on her brain had tightened.

"Jennifer, Jennifer. Now, you really do want to apologize for those nasty remarks, don't you?"

"Yes, Master."

"Then do so, if you please."

"I offer my apologies, Master."

"And—you offer your body. Is that not so?"

"That is so, Master. I offer my body."

"Your unsoiled body."

"My unsoiled body. Yes, Master."

Then she was alone. For how long she didn't know. All that she did know was that she did not run. Her limbs would perform no useful function apart from dressing her in the gown he had handed her. Then she remained immobile until he next entered the room. As soon as he came into the range of her vision—dressed in his tunic of purple—she moved. Her hands came together, palm facing palm, and the connected pair rose so that the tips of her index fingers lightly touched the middle of her lower jaw. It was a gesture she had never seen performed before, and she did not know how she performed it. But it was not her own mind which caused its performance, that much she did know.

"All is ready, Jennifer. You will come with me, please."

He—the Master—looked elegant now. The purple tunic and that golden design on its front. It looked complicated at first, but as she stared at it more, she recognized it for what it was. A highly stylized cross.

“You notice the emblem. It is not mine, but it protects me from someone. You know the one of whom I speak.”

“No, Master, I do not.”

Herak’s eyes narrowed and, as they did, Jenny felt a short burst of heat within her skull. When the heat subsided Herak was smiling.

“You are correct, of course. Your uncle has kept things from you, Jennifer. If you are a very good girl, I may let you in on a secret—a centuries-old secret. Would you like that?”

“If it pleases the Master.”

“Excellent! Come now. There are things to do, and I want you to assist me.”

She followed him into what had been the master bedroom of the house. Awaiting them in that room were the other three girls who had been taken with her. Two of them were attired as herself. The last girl was tied to the bed, a tape firmly placed over her mouth.

“You wonder why she is restrained,” Herak said. “I shall tell you, only because it is important that you know. For what I am about to do, I require the blood of a virgin female. This one says she is a virgin. Do you believe her? I myself do not know the truth of the matter. I *could* know, but I choose not to. I shall know, with time. Another odd thing, perhaps. The formula requires that this blood be taken forcibly—she must fight the taking. Do not ask me why the ceremony re-

quires this. Again, I do not know. But the lack of knowledge does not stop me from doing what I must. She will fight the taking of her blood, that is enough. It is important that you know this, Jennifer, because you are to be my assistant in this matter. As Qetura, long ago, assisted my enemy in this work, so you shall assist me. Do you wish to assist me?"

She did not want to assist him in anything. Yet—

"Yes, Master."

"And you shall obey me in every small detail, is that not so?"

"Yes, Master. I shall obey you. In every small detail. I shall obey you."

It was then that he extended the knife to her.

"Be very careful when you slice her throat. Do not give her the chance to plunge her head forward and use the instrument for suicide. I want her to remain quite alive—for now."

Accepting the knife, Jenny turned from Herak and looked down at the squirming girl on the bed, at the girl's wide-eyed terror.

Good God! she thought to herself. *What am I doing? Am I really going through with this?*

But even as she asked herself the question, the motion of her upper body—as it leaned across the heaving girl on the bed—answered it.

Yes. She was going through with it.

A diversionary tactic.

At somewhat before four in the afternoon, with the sun sending down specially prepared firebolts to hammer into his skin, Cam slipped down the side of the dune facing the villa and, at a flat

crawl, made a new discovery about the desert. It was composed of very fine grains of sand which lost no opportunity to creep into any available opening. He had gone no farther than twenty yards when he accepted with stoicism the fact that, where his skin had been left untouched by the sun in the sky, it would be treated with more deliberate malice by the sands below. Anybody who talked or wrote about the romance of the desert ought to crawl around its surface for a while—after he'd been brought to a full broil by the afternoon sun, of course.

A diversionary tactic.

He set his jaws and crawled forward at an even pace, the big .357 Magnum nestled in the small of his back under his belt, his shirt flap covering the metal which, though blued, might well pick up a glinting beam of the great ball of fire above. Ahead of him, the two painters still worked at their art. Behind him somewhere, to the right or left and he didn't care which, a black cat was moving across the sands—burning the hell out of the pads of its paws, he hoped.

No, that was wrong of him. He couldn't blame Ktara for this, not this specific discomfort. Although, if that same black cat had not come calling one rainy night nine months ago, he would not be in his present position right now. And, very definitely, Jenny Harmon would not be in some remote villa on the edge of the civilized world, exposed to whatever fate some evil bastard of pre-history had in store for her.

But, for better or worse—and it looked like it was for worse—he'd bought into the business, and

there was little he could do about it now except to see it all through.

A diversionary tactic.

Well, maybe at four in the afternoon that was really all that could be expected of him. If it was necessary—and from what Ktara had said, it was—he'd play the part. But he'd be damned if that was all there was going to be to it. No. Out here in the afternoon sun, somebody was going to get himself killed. On the more than slim possibility that the somebody might be one Cameron Sanchez, he vowed that he was going to take somebody—correction: some bodies—along with him.

The two priestly artists were going to be the first. They were at least the primary candidates for the dubious honor.

Before that, of course, he'd have to get within reach—and quietly.

It was four fifteen when the Puerto Rican giant rose up from the sands behind the artist who was still working on the left portion of the wall. He'd had some time to think about how he was going to handle things and he'd decided that there was no need to create the diversion quite yet—or he hoped there wasn't. He hoped that whatever Jenny was involved in, she could handle her own thing until he was inside the outer walls. But while he was *outside* them . . .

The gnarled priest took Cam's handblade to the side of his head without a whimper, his knees simply sagging below him and his untidy clothing getting a bath from the bucket of brown paint which his left hand had supported. Cam planted a fast left boot-tip in the fallen man's left temple, just to make certain, and accompanied that move-

ment by grasping the bucket of black paint which rested against the wall. The application of the black paint to the work which had been done was most unartistic, Cam reflected, but the big, fast glop accomplished his goal—the cross, or that combination of delicate lines which identified the thing as being a cross, was taken out in the one bucket-heaving motion.

By the time the empty paint bucket again hit the sand, Cam was hurling himself toward the second priest. As for that priest—

He turned only slightly, then seemed to shrug.

And then went on with what he had been doing, unconcerned.

Unconcerned. He took Cam's right heel in the face just that way. Then he fell backward onto the sand. Dead.

Dead?

Cam questioned it. The palm of his right hand moved in under the twisted figure's heart, his left hand felt for a pulse at the wrist.

Nothing and nothing.

Cam rose to a stand. It somehow was all too easy.

The next ones won't be.

His head jerked toward the sound. No, not a sound. Toward the sender of the message, anyway. The black cat which now was moving through the open gateway. He started to follow.

Not yet!

Right. Not yet. A bucket of blackness on some finely executed artwork. Then—yet.

The screams started as he passed through the gates.

That bitch! he thought to himself, the thought being directed toward Ktara.

His next thought was wishful: that he had brought an extra paint bucket into the courtyard.

Because there were three crosses on the exterior house wall.

The screams had been sounded by one of the four misshapen priests who had been coming through the main entryway, the priest closest to the doorway, in fact. Cam couldn't tell just what Ktara had done to cause the noisy reaction—she was nowhere in sight, probably having gone through the open doorway and into the house itself. Nonetheless, whatever she had done, she had secured the desired effect. Operation diversion was effectively underway.

So be it.

Cam filled his right hand with the Magnum and blew the top of the skull off the nearest of the four priests who had begun a halfhearted charge. Where he had expected a spurting fountain of red as the twisted form jerked backward, he was surprised to see—a spurting fountain, yes, but one of an off yellow color.

Again so be it. This was hardly the time to go into the aesthetics of internal coloration. He sent a second blast from the big gun into the chest of a second priest, who folded like a crushed beer can. The "blood" color was the same bile-yellow, but this time Cam didn't bother to notice. You can get used to anything with time.

The score was more even now, and Cam decided it was time to save on shells. With his pistol shoved into his belt, he met the third priest foot-

edge to face. There was a snapping sound, after which the awkwardly tilted head led the body down to the earth of the courtyard. The hands of the fourth priest, meanwhile, were inches from Cam's shoulder. The shoulder whirled, as did its owner, and Cam's heavy left fist pummeled into a nose bridge which cracked under the impact. A right handblade followed to the side of the neck and, following that, a left boot-tip slammed the priest's head smashing into the rough wall exterior at the exact center of what had been a rudely painted black cross.

To the black had now been added yellow. But not enough.

Grasping the fallen priest by the heels, Cam's mighty arms knotted as they swung the half-dead body back around in a half-circle, then a complete circle, as Cam's feet pivoted and his wrists crossed—

The head of the priest crack-splashed into the wall—again at the cross location—only this time, when Cam let loose his hold on the now-dead man's ankles, there was more yellow than black.

And thus, no cross.

One down, two to go. But, Cam decided, in a less messy way.

The owner of the villa had been cultivating a garden around the walls of his home, and there were quantities of rich dark soil in piles waiting to be used. A quick dip down, a handful of the earth, and a rub—and there went cross number two. Another of the same series of actions, and cross number three was obliterated by the dark soily smudge.

It was when Cam had completed that action

that he noticed the stillness in the courtyard. That would have been natural if there were only himself and four corpses within the outer walls. But the plain fact was that there were others. Three others.

One of them—the one who led the charge, if that was what it was, at a run—was a bent, hobbling priest just like those he'd already obliterated. The other two—

They looked much the same, except that Cam recognized one of them. It was the deep-lined, creviced face of the man in the photograph which Thorka had sent to Westhampton. The dead man. The dead *young* man. He didn't look dead, nor young. Nor did his almost look-alike. Nor did either of them look in much of a hurry as they shuffled toward him. So—

First things first.

Yellow "blood" again oozed as a snap-whip crescent kick downed the priest with a caved-in chest. Then Cam waited in a *pa-kua* cat stance, his Magnum again clenched in his right fist. As wispy as the husk-faced ones looked, the idea came to him that they were going to be a bit tougher than his previous opponents. Somebody else agreed with him.

"Throw away your weapon, Mr. Sanchez."

The voice came from a window—from the young man in the window. A dark Latin type—Latin? Hell, *Cam* was Latin! An Egyptian, then. A handsome face. And next to it, another—

Jenny's.

"You know me?" Cam asked. He had looked up only briefly before returning his eyes to the two figures who were slowly closing the distance between where they walked and where he waited.

"I know of you," the Egyptian replied. "I am Herak. I take it you know me."

"I've heard the name, friend. Now, if you don't mind, I'm busy—unless you want to call off these friends of yours."

"There's hardly a chance of that, Mr. Sanchez. Besides, now that you have interrupted my proceedings, I might as well allow you to amuse me. And if—if—the thought has entered your mind that you might try a shot at me with your pistol, I advise you now not to do so. No matter how expert you think you are with that weapon, I assure you that you will accomplish nothing. Nothing except to put a nasty large hole in the face of Miss Harmon. She has been somewhat uncooperative, you see."

It was precisely what Cam had been thinking, the first part of it, at least. As to the second part—

He will see to it, Mr. Sanchez!

The message was loud and clear, although strictly mental. The messenger was still nowhere to be seen, but her mode of expression was unmistakable.

All right. In any case, his attention was needed for more immediate problems.

They came at him side by side, a foolish way to attack, but Cam was in no mood to argue. He let fly with his left fist—straight into the deep-lined face nearest that hand.

He winced.

His knuckles bounced back toward him, smarting with the pain. It had been like striking solid stone! And the solid stone didn't even rock with the blow. Instead—

With a clumsy movement—like a bear swinging

a heavy paw—the one on Cam's right struck. But, also like the bear swinging its paw, it came with force. Just how much force Cam didn't bother to compute. He was too busy making certain he was landing properly.

He hit, rolled and was on his feet again, some five yards distance from the two rock-men who were still slowly advancing. The big Magnum swung up.

And fired.

This time his assault had its effect. The copper-jacketed bullet struck one of them on the left shoulder. The force of a .357 Python is something to reckon with. The shoulder reckoned. In a splatter of shattering fragments, it came away from the main body of the thing.

The thing, with its brotherlike being, still advanced.

"The rest, Mr. Sanchez, would be boring," said the voice from the window.

Cam's eyes shot upward, but he could not see the young man or Jenny. What he did see was a bright flash of something.

Something which seemed to hurtle from the window directly toward himself.

He raised a shielding forearm over his eyes. The thing—ball of fire or whatever it was—struck anyway.

Cam accepted the white-hot sun into his brain, shrugged it off and prepared to meet the next attack—from whatever quarter.

A millisecond into his preparation, his mind fell into a deep black pit. As for his body, he didn't know. Since he couldn't feel his body anymore, he didn't care.

CHAPTER 9

An instant before the priest in the courtyard had screamed, alerting Herak to the fact that something was amiss, he had been pleased.

The girl. This Jennifer Harmon. She was so beautiful!

His body—the body he had taken over—lusted for her flesh. More important, he himself wanted her. So terribly bad he wanted her, his every sense told him to take her—now! But he couldn't do that. Not until after he was certain that he might not need her blood for the work he had to accomplish. In the meantime—

She was such a beautiful servant. Beautiful and obedient. Although she could not help but be obedient, could she? Perhaps later—if she was to have a later—he would see how she reacted to him without his controlling that reaction. Yes, perhaps. But for now she must remain closely controlled. He could tell by her eyes and thoughts that she did not like the acts she had performed, that she was revolted by his minions, but afterward—when she saw his complete power . . .

She had not wanted to use the knife. He'd had to warn her sternly. "Be careful that your hand

does not tremble. You would not want the girl's death on your conscience, would you?"

"No, Master," she had replied, and her hand calmed as she knelt beside the bed. The slice was correct, but he saw to it that it would be, controlling the angle and depth of the blade-tip's entry into the squirming girl's throat, and then controlling the pressure of the golden bowl which his blonde-haired servant, discarding the knife for the moment, placed under the cut.

When the work was completed, he bandaged the girl's neck, then beckoned Jenny to the place he had prepared by the window. As she knelt again and placed the golden bowl onto the small altar he had fashioned from the lacquered end table, he watched her eyes as they gazed with interest at the symbols which surrounded the altar.

"The signs of the Zodiac," he said. "The *real* Zodiac, the one that came from the first land. Not twelve signs, but thirteen—one in addition to those you may recognize. For there is another world of influence, of perhaps greater influence than all the others added together. It's name—ah, but it has many names and, in any case, the words would have little significance for you. Perhaps, later, they may have every significance, but that is only perhaps and later. Now, do you wish to kneel by me as I invoke the image of the powerful world?"

"I wish as the Master wishes," Jenny replied.

"Kneel, then."

She knelt, he beside her. Then the words began. The words . . . and the movement upon the surface of the blood. The movement . . . and the words.

Abruptly, Herak rose, his face red with anger. "Again I am cheated!" He looked swiftly about the room. "The knife—where—"

"It is here, Master." The blonde girl, still upon her knees, had it in her hand.

"Rise, then—and slay that impure one!"

Jenny Harmon's mind jerked. *Slay?* He wanted her to—*kill?*

But nonetheless she stood. "Yes, Master," she heard herself saying. And she saw her hand ready the knife for a downward thrust, just as she felt her feet moving her body closer to the bed and to the girl who lay trussed upon it. As horrible as it had been, the taking of the blood paled in its horror compared to what she was now being asked to do. As for kneeling before that golden bowl and listening to those strange words and the forceful way which Herak had pronounced them, that too was dim in significance compared to—

To what she had seen upon the surface of the blood.

It had been but for a moment. From Herak's tone, she knew he was somehow trying to hold the image there, but it disappeared almost instantly. It was—

A sphere. Red or black, it wasn't exactly smooth but it wasn't rough, either. As a matter of fact, she could remember nothing at all clear about it, except two things—

First, a deep chill lightnined through her entire system when it appeared.

Second, as it faded quickly from view, it seemed to be replaced by something else. Something craggy, something fearsome and ugly and immediately repulsive. Something horrible and

terrifying, stirring within her some fear which she felt all humans carried from primeval times.

A face.

A leering, salivating, all-consuming face with searing eyes and facial features which resembled a boar or a snake or both—and more. A face of a gargoyle from the medieval *grimoires*, perhaps, but a face which belonged to a *living thing*!

Then that too disappeared, and her mind was filled only with Herak's rage.

And now this. His command to her that she must—*slay*!

And she . . . *about to do it*!

The knife now was raised to a position before her face. Both of her hands grasped the handle. Below the tip of the blade was the upturned disbelieving face of—

What was her name? Jenny couldn't remember. And yet this girl had just yesterday been one of those who had called her friend, accepted her, eagerly showed her the intricacies of their work. And now—

Jennifer Harmon was going to murder her.

"Quickly, Jennifer," Herak said softly. She looked at him. He was smiling. He was pleased.

For that quick moment. Then something happened.

A cry—a scream. From somewhere outside—

And Herak cursing—turning to the window.

And, with the sound of something like a rushing of wind in her ears, releasing her mind.

"*No!*" she screamed at him. Then, realizing that she still held the knife, cocked back her arm to let it fly—*at him!*

"No is correct, Jennifer," he said calmly, his

eyes burning into hers. He took a step toward her. "Finish her—quickly!"

Shuddering, she again lifted the knife. But then something else happened. A gunshot! And again, the relaxing of Herak's control over her mind. And, taking that advantage, she pushed the weapon into the air from her.

Herak caught it deftly in his right hand.

"Jennifer—does the death of an insignificant human being bother you so much? If so, be now bothered!"

Again, deftly, Herak handled the knife, flipping it in his hand from handle to blade, then snapping it downward.

The girl on the bed jerked up, straining her bonds as the blade sliced through her throat. Then she fell back, still.

Herak's voice could not be countermanded. "Come, Jennifer. To the window. I believe there is a friend of yours outside."

She saw as Cam went down, as Herak laughed brutally. Then she, like Cam, fell downward to the first available surface, her mind exhausted.

Cam's first reaction when the light greeted his eyes was to shield those eyes, but the arms he was counting on using didn't obey. To his left and right, his wrists were held firmly—by the two men of stone whose grips were like vises.

The room was a bedroom. On the bed was a naked girl—a dead girl, judging by the dagger which pinned her neck to the bed. On the floor by the window, dressed in a flimsy white gown, was Jenny.

"If you've harmed her—"

His words were directed to the young man in purple, the same one who had been with Jenny at the window. "If you've caused her any harm at all—"

"Be silent, dead man," the young man said. "Herak commands you. Obey, and it may be that I shall allow you to remain alive a little longer. It is, however, only a matter of time before your mind enters the forever blackness of Nothing."

Herak's eyes flickered toward the two stone men. "Strip him."

The process of declothing Cam was uncomplicated. There was a series of cloth-tearings, then he stood naked, his arms back in the wrist-locked position.

Herak seemed pleased.

"You are a fine specimen, perhaps one of the finest I have ever seen. Your body is almost perfect. I think that I shall claim it as my own, but not yet. At the present, due to the consideration of external relations with my surrounding community, I believe that the body of a member of this household is more suitable. But I shall be ready for a change soon, perhaps tonight, perhaps tomorrow."

"You may have no tomorrow."

Cam and Herak both jerked their heads to the entryway to the room. Ktara stood framed in the doorway, her expression one of complete contempt.

Herak bowed mockingly. "My lady! How pleasant it is—and after all these years. Especially when I note that your beauty has not changed a single iota. Nor your imperiousness, I might add. However, while I compliment you on your resil-

iciency of flesh and mind through the years since I last had the pleasure of your company, as you can see I am occupied with matters of my own. I therefore suggest that you make your departure. At once, if you want to see either of your two young friends alive again."

"And what guaranty do I have that I shall see them alive again?"

"None. But, then, such is life—for those such as you and I."

Cam had begun a smile. Many times, he had seen Ktara take out an opponent with her mental powers, and now he was sure he was going to see it again. The problem was, he didn't see it again. The woman in black merely looked at him—sadly, he thought—and shook her head.

"A pity," Herak said, his voice jovial, his eyes turning toward Cam. "Such a pity for the woman that her Master deemed it necessary to give me powers equal to her own. My powers thus cancel hers in the confrontation which is to come, just as your power—that of physical strength—is negated now by my two servants who lock you in their grip."

"Maybe," Cam said. "But there's somebody else you're going to have to face—in that confrontation which is to come."

"Indeed there is! And I look forward to it, Mr. Sanchez. You think—*do* you think—for a moment that your obliteration of the cross symbols will make any difference whatsoever? They can and will be repaired. In addition, as you can see, I wear the symbol upon my chest. And, in addition to that—"

He looked at Ktara. "In the dark of the early

morning, I felt the Master's presence. The symbol of his bane was upon the roof, but flat so that he could not spy it before his close approach. Tonight, however, he will have little difficulty spying the sign, for it shall be large and it shall be upright. In a moment, I wish you to leave this place. Run back to our Master and report to him of the special safeguard I hold against him, which I shall use to shield myself against his meddling."

Herak laughed as he nodded to the stone men who held Cam. With two simultaneous jerks on his wrists, they painfully guided him toward the stairwell which led upward from the bedroom.

"Almost all is ready," Herak said to Cam. "My priests have stopped their hammering. Now all that is needed up on the roof is the thick rope and yourself—and a knife which can be used to slice your flesh." And now looking at Jenny: "A knife *she* shall use upon you."

Again Herak laughed, this time cruelly. "You see, Mr. Sanchez, you are to be upon that roof tonight. Correctly trussed, *you* will form the symbol which the Black Master cannot approach. I offer him the cross of crosses. A human cross—a *cross of blood!*"

"There is no way possible," Ktara said.

She stood before Harmon's wheelchair. They were inside his tent, the streams of late afternoon coming through the rear flaps.

Harmon's hawklike face was taut. "Come this night, Dracula *will* be released from his casket. By that time, Cam *will* be cut down—and the wooden cross upon which he hangs *will* be disassembled. Jennifer *will* be taken from that villa

before harm comes to her, and this fiend named Herak *will* perish. I say these things—I do—and I *mean* them.”

“But, Professor—”

“You, Ktara, will not crumble, not before these things are done!”

“But I cannot release Mr. Sanchez. As I have said, the power of Herak is such that I cannot break the spell he has placed upon those ropes.”

“You need not concern yourself with that. I will take care of the ropes. What is it?”

His question, she knew, was prompted by the expression on her face, an expression she knew he couldn’t read. It was one of admiration for this man of steel will, a man to whom she had been afraid to tell the truth of what faced them—of what might face his niece. But she had told him, and now that she had, she knew she had misjudged his psychology. Yes, he was upset, and yes, he might be mortally afraid for his Jennifer. But one thing he was not going to be was indecisive. His was indeed a mind she would like to be able to read, but that steel plate over his brain prevented her from doing so.

“I asked you what was the matter?” Harmon said.

“Your method,” she replied. “How do you plan to release Mr. Sanchez?”

“He will be cut down.”

“But there is no one who can approach the cross. You cannot. You have not the—excuse me—the physical power. My Master cannot. And I, while I can get near him, I can do nothing once I do.”

Harmon nodded, his eyes clear, his brain ob-

viously working. "But if I could get on that roof, and if I had a knife in my hand, is the nature of the spell upon the ropes such that I could not cut through them?"

Ktara thought about it briefly. "No. The spell is directed only at me—and at Mr. Sanchez. Herak knows the physical strength of Mr. Sanchez, and he has guarded against that."

"But not my physical strength—nor my knife."

"Professor Harmon, just how do you expect to be able to use a knife up there on that—"

"I don't." He smiled wryly. "Now—once Mr. Sanchez is free, what then?"

She did not return his smile. "You are an optimist, Professor. An optimist in a universe which, when known well, does not favor optimism." Her voice was grave. "Yet . . . there is a thing which needs to be done. Something which perhaps Dr. Thorka can do."

The cross to which Cam was lashed held his feet some fifteen to twenty inches from the surface of the wide wooden platform which had been constructed to maintain the structure in an upright position. They had done their work well, the live-dead priests who had wielded the hammers on this roof. They had done their work too well, just as had Herak when he had placed the spell upon the ropes which held wrists, ankles, and neck to the beams.

He cursed the dying sun which sent sharp beams of light into his half-closed eyes, the dying sun which should have given him a feeling of triumph. He had, after all, stayed alive until now. No small feat, that. One which he might not have

predicted hours ago, when he knew he was caught, when he realized that trying to battle the two stone men would be as effective as trying to take out a mountain which had fists in addition to impermeability, when he realized that Herak himself could fry him with just a small amount of concentration. So staying alive was something, at least.

But in so doing, he provided a block to the one who could help Jenny. Even though the wooden cross on which he was hanging would be deterrent enough without his presence.

There was one thing, though, that Cam didn't understand. Herak had referred to a cross of blood and to a knife. So far there had been no evidence of what he was talking about. The men of stone had stripped him of all his clothing and tied him to the cross-bars, that was all. Then, after Herak had said his magic words, Cam had been left alone. For how long? An hour? Two? Closer to three, probably.

A cross of blood.

Eventually, maybe. There was no telling how long he could maintain the muscular combination of pressure-relaxation which kept his blood circulating properly. Anybody who had studied under Cam's karate master would be able to take an hour or two of standing or sitting—or, yes, hanging—in an awkward or impossible position. It was part of gaining the proper attitude, part of making oneself “at peace with the natural and unnatural—so that nothing is foreign to body or spirit.” But, regardless of human resourcefulness, there would come a time—

If he was left here long enough, this would be a cross of blood.

It would begin when the muscles of his shoulders and neck no longer could support the weight of his head. Then the ropes around his neck would block the head's descent. It would be a choking death, a slow choking death. There would be gagging and coughing.

And blood.

Was that what Herak meant?

No. He had specifically referred to a knife.

A knife—

Such as the one that now reflected the sun's drying rays.

She came up to the roof level from the stairwell which led down to the master bedroom, holding the weapon before her as an acolyte in church might carry the cross of the faith, her face as solemn as that acolyte's might be, her eyes staring at him and through him.

"Jenny—"

"It is time for the blood to be drawn," she said. Again, the church image filled Cam's head, for the way she intoned the words was as a priest might do when repeating for the thousandth time a prayer which, although necessary for the ceremony at hand, was not really anything he felt to be germane and thus was something simply to get out of the way.

"Jenny—it's me. It's Cam!"

She had stopped before him, her eyes now looking up into his face but not into his eyes. "My Master says that you should feel honored. He says that I should tell you that you should be

willing to stop the Dark One. He says that you hate the Dark One just as does Herak."

Without waiting for any kind of response, she stepped up onto the supporting structure, her flimsily covered body pressing against his naked flesh—and the knife rising to his breast.

"I am instructed to tell you that the cuts will not be deep. The bleeding of you is only to be symbolic. It has no efficacy at all with regard to the one who intends to invade this place. It is but a taunt, an insult which—"

"Jenny! Do you *know* what you're doing? Are you aware? Are you doing this consciously?"

She smiled blankly. "A part of my mind says that I do not want to do this thing. That part of my mind says that I have a strong feeling for the man who now is before my eyes, that I should feel something close to shame for looking upon his nakedness. But that is a small part of my mind, a part which also says that it does not want me to do what I must—what my Master has commanded me. Please do not be frightened or unduly concerned. The Master has told me to assure you that it is not your death he seeks by this action. Please do not move, or it is possible that my hands might slip—"

And the knife came at him, piercing him just slightly in the center of his chest. Her hands pulled the blade carefully to Cam's right—across his chest and into his shoulder, along his taut bicep and his inner elbow, stopping just before the place where the ropes bound his wrist. The cut was not deep, but it was deep enough to bleed small rivulets of blood. The left side was next, then:

"Please. It is important that you do not move now," she said.

Again the blade poised, this time directly under his chin. He held back the urge to swallow as it entered his flesh and moved downward—crossing the horizontal line of blood which she already had carved, moving down to his stomach, and stopping just above his groin.

She stepped from him, her eyes looking into his as if they were trying to say something, as if she were trying to ask him to help her—or to forgive her.

Then, from below, there was a female scream. A scream cut short abruptly.

Jenny closed her eyes. Her body shuddered.

"Jenny—what is it?"

"I must leave you now. The third girl—her blood has not been found acceptable to my Master. The first two girls died earlier, one while you have been up here. He has communicated to me that he will require my blood now."

With a surge of strength, Cam pulled at the ropes which bound his wrists. He cursed as he allowed his muscles to relax. The pulling was to no avail, just as earlier attempts had failed. He watched as Jenny turned from him, a wistful smile on her face. And then she was gone, disappearing down the stairwell.

His eyes raised to the west and to the hills.

And the dying sun.

Herak was kneeling at the altar, the golden bowl before him.

"Join me, Jennifer. Kneel beside me once more. Bring the knife with you. We shall need it."

A helpless thought raced through her mind—a swift question. One which he deigned to answer:

“No, Jennifer. They cannot help you. Sanchez, your uncle, the dark one you know as Ktara, the old man from Romania—nor the other one of whom you know little. None of them can help you now. None.”

CHAPTER 10

Alexandru Thorka fumbled in his shirt pocket for a box of matches, found it, and struck three damp match heads before he found one that would flame into a blaze of light. Lifting the glass on the battered kerosene lamp which he moved to the left of him on the surface of the camp table, he lighted the wick.

Night had visited the campsite and, although the work he was engaged in was almost completed, he did not wish to make any error due to the dimness which had crept into the tent interior like some stalking animal.

He looked around him, as if expecting to see that very animal behind him, its claws poised for a deadly spring.

There was nothing.

Nothing except that long crate. The top was closed, of course, but Thorka knew what it contained.

And now the night had come . . .

Still, he had his task to complete. He had promised Harmon that he would hurry. His friend had insisted that the job be done as professionally as possible, insisted that the job was all important. Still, it seemed a sacrilege.

The red stoneware beaker. The one that had been broken soon after its finding. The one with the skeletal calcium deposit within its interior. The one that had marked the beginning of death and strangeness on the ancient sands of this Egyptian desert.

A sacrilege.

To take pieces of something whose age could only be guessed at and to use a modern epoxy—

“It must be in one piece, Alex,” Harmon had said. “You have the skill. Skill and speed, those are the two essentials. It shall be needed after nightfall.”

Thorka had not clearly understood, not at first. “But you and Miss Ktara—are you not leaving the camp now? Will you not still be absent when night falls?”

To both questions Harmon said that Thorka was correct.

“Then, how will you—what I mean is, who will collect this beaker when I have—”

And then he had halted his question. He knew the answer. For his old friend’s eyes had moved to the side of the tent where the long crate lay.

It was then that Thorka understood.

And it was now that the task was complete. The final piece of the beaker was in place, the final excess of the binder was wiped free from the exterior surface. Thorka sighed. It *was* a sacrilege.

“You have done well, Dr. Thorka.”

The Romanian straightened in his chair. Behind him—that’s where the deep cultured voice had come from. And that was where his eyes refused to look. His hands, both on the surface of the desk, trembled. A cold chill invaded his spine.

"You have done *very* well, Doctor." The voice paused. "You know who it is who speaks to you?"

Thorka nodded slowly. "I believe so, yes."

"That is brave of you to admit. You have, of course, suspected my existence for some time. Suspicion, however, is not proof—is it, Dr. Thorka?"

"No . . . it is not."

"Then continue to keep your eyes where they are—before you. I would have little hesitation in killing you, but I have more important matters to which I must attend."

Thorka again nodded, his eyes falling upon the red beaker. As they did, the beaker vanished—disappeared into thin air.

A sharp laugh as Thorka jumped.

"No more than a simple parlor trick, Doctor, I assure you."

Thorka's voice was calm. "I did not think you went in for simple parlor magic, Count Dracula."

"What you think or do not think concerns me little. As for the name Count Dracula, I neither accept it nor reject it. The business to which I now attend had its beginnings long before the name Dracula ever was uttered upon human lips. Good evening, Dr. Thorka."

The Romanian did not move even after he heard the movement of the tent flap behind him. At another sound, however, he turned and faced the crate. The top was open.

His face was taut as the sound of leathery wings faded from his hearing.

Outside the walls of the villa, on a high dune which gave him a view of the top of the villa roof, Harmon readjusted the telescopic sights of

the large bore rifle he'd taken from one of the police officials at camp.

"I'm not sure Cam can last much longer," he said.

"He can and will," said the dark woman who stood next to the professor's wheelchair. "Be patient, Professor Harmon. It is not yet time."

"I do not like the air tonight," he said. "There's something too still about it. And the sky. You have noticed, I'm sure, that—"

"Yes, Professor, I have noticed."

In fact, at that very moment, she was looking at the sky which normally would be a fountain of light, with its tiny droplets of stars flashing brightly. But, during the past half hour, it seemed the stars had been steadily losing some of that brightness—especially in one part of the sky where it appeared some great gaseous cloud was being born, a cloud of darkness which seemed to be absorbing the life's blood from the lights of the heavens.

The stars—*they may well drip blood*. Ktara had put it that way. Was this the beginning?

"It has been night for some time," he said. "Perhaps Alex has not—"

"Dr. Thorka's work is completed. Soon, Professor, soon." She looked at the long barrel of the weapon now lying across Harmon's lap. "You are aware of the chances you take with Mr. Sanchez' life?"

"He's a dead man if he remains there. Also, if he remains there, Jennifer is lost to us—and to herself. The risk is one which must be taken."

Talk, talk—he did not want to talk! He wanted to be at the business at hand. It seemed centuries

ago, but in fact it was but minutes, that he'd mentally released the sliver in the Count's heart. If now Ktara said that Thorka had completed the task he'd been given, what was the holdup? Why were they waiting?

But he knew why they were waiting. To free Cam prematurely would accomplish nothing except his recapture and the restoration of whatever damage he could cause. They were waiting for a particular sound.

The sound of wings.

Harmon looked again at that one section of sky. In the short interval since he'd last looked, it had grown decidedly darker.

"Tak peha hert ent heh set ent hesiu . . ."

Herak almost sang the mighty words as one might sing from a lofty mountain. There was a joy in his heart this night, for this night he knew the tendrils of history were converging upon this place, upon his very person. It had been a long history, during which those with whom he now was on the verge of establishing contact had been forgotten by the simpletons who dwelt upon this world. The years of their separation were as nothing compared to the light-years which no doubt separated that dark world from the one upon which Herak now sang. It had been, after all, six thousand years—and even then the one who called himself Herak's Master had been concerned that it was too late:

"Their world carries them swiftly. It can be halted now, destroyed now. If we fail this time . . . but we will not fail this time!"

But he had failed, the Master had. And that failure had been due to Herak's intervention. They would recognize that, surely they would, and they would reward him for his help. He was certain of that, just as he was sure that he could make contact with them. Regardless of the physical place in the universe in which their world was located, all that was necessary on his part was the proper preparation.

The proper words, said the proper way.

The proper symbols.

The blood of an undefiled woman.

With those things, communication was assured. But that was all, merely the fusing of thoughts, his with theirs. Thus, a strong and powerful mind was necessary. That initial contact would immediately sear to fine ash a mind that was weak. Thanks to the Master and Qetura, his mind was developed to where it could withstand the contact. And after contact—

He looked from the corner of his eyes at the blonde girl kneeling beside him, the girl whose own eyes stared down into the frothing bowl of blood which had earlier been taken from her throat. A virginal girl whose blood was necessary for the initial contact—

And whose entire essence might be necessary as a gift to those who dwelt on that faraway world.

"Samas em xu, sepsi ager nu . . ."

The Master had said it: "After contact, they will expect to receive a token gift of servitude. For that moment, they will be passive, waiting in patience. In that instant, I will destroy them."

A gift. A token gift. To such as they were, what

thing on this world would be more than a token gift? They who once controlled this world in its entirety . . .

But if they wanted such a gift, he would supply it—in the form of the most beautiful girl he ever had seen. Young, fresh, awaiting his attention—a personal attention he himself wanted so much to bestow upon her. Yes, because she was the one thing he wanted since regaining his life on this world, she would be an acceptable offering to the old ones.

“Neterzert pera henasen er maa neferuk . . .”

Yes, he would sacrifice this one thing. She would be as nothing when compared with what they could do for him. To learn the things *they* knew! To accept the mantle of leadership which they might well bestow upon him. He would be worthy in their eyes, he knew that. After all, it was he who had saved them from the blood stealer. It was he who had kept with him all these years the memory of them and their world. And it was he who, after all these years, was once again intoning the prayer words recognizing their power. And this time he knew—deep within him—that even should he commit some small error, and he trusted that he would not, they would not punish him for the infraction. He knew that what he was offering was something they wanted.

Not the girl, no. She was merely the token. The real thing he offered was what they could not hope to achieve without his help—without his present act:

The reestablishment of their rule on this world.
By Herak, it would begin.

Through Herak, it would continue.

And with the power he received this night he would be enabled to revenge himself forever upon the dark one who had thought himself Herak's Master. With their black forces within him, a mere pointing of his finger would gather into the room, even on the darkest of nights, the beams of a sun which might be long over the hills. He would hurl these sun rays into the face of his adversary, rays which through his now superior will he would fashion into the deadly cross shape. And then would the Dark Master's essence be extinguished—once, and for all time to come.

"Ubenk am xut, ubenk am xut . . ."

Herak sang, his heart filled with joy and anticipation.

And before him the broiling blood in the golden bowl began to lessen its motion, to quiet into the calm surface which, when completely still, would mirror the mirror finish of the gold which contained it, and then would bring to his eyes with absolute clarity that dark world somewhere in the cosmos—and those who dwelt upon it. Already, in fact, there were the beginnings of a shaping within the dark fluid. Yes, yes—the beginnings—

In the distance there was a flash of lightning in the sky, followed by a rumble of thunder. But closer to the villa, closer to the open window which Herak faced, there was to be a smaller flash, a smaller sound—but one which, to Herak, would be just as significant as those which came from the heavens.

For on a dune, facing the villa, a man in a wheelchair was steadying his eye against a short

telescope, his finger against a trigger. And a dark woman, whose eyes were concentrating upon the roof of the villa, intoned a single word:

“Now.”

CHAPTER 11

Hold still, Mr. Sanchez. Very still.

The words which thudded into Cam's brain almost had the opposite effect. His head snapped up alertly, but then a mental picture came into his mind. It seemed that he was staring down into the business end of a long rifle with a sniper-scope mounted on its barrel. Behind it was the grim sharp-angled face of a man in a wheelchair. But his eyes saw nothing—nothing but the empty roof and a flash from distant lightning.

The bindings which hold your neck are first. Move your head as far to the right as you can.

Looking down into that barrel as his mind was, Cam did not think it any time to argue. In the back of his mind, however, he had one small concern. Harmon, at least to Cam's knowledge, hadn't fired a rifle in years. And it seemed to Cam that this particular bit of marksmanship might well call for an expert!

He has help, Mr. Sanchez, came the somewhat comforting message.

And then from the dark hills before him, Cam saw a tiny flash of light. Something—with the buzz and sting of a hornet—passed by his neck to the left, instantly followed by the sound of

splintering wood directly behind him. The report of the rifle reached his ears just as the next directions reached his mind:

Next, your ankles. Then right wrist, followed by left.

In succession—three flashes, three stinging hornets, three sounds of rifle shots. By the time the sound of the last report reached his ears, what had been a human cross rose up from the tiles of the roof. He had taken two steps toward the stairs leading downward when—

The other cross, Mr. Sanchez!

Ah, yes—the wooden one. He turned toward it, then turned back again toward the stairwell. He had company.

The two priests came up fast, but he didn't miss the heavy footfalls of a third behind them. Very well, his muscles were aching for some kind of action—but first, the cross.

The horizontal beam had been nailed into place with four long spikes, and the nailing had been firm. Not firm enough, however, as Cam planted his right sole against the vertical and pulled mightily on the right crossarm. The force of the pull almost dropped him to his back, but he regained equilibrium on the way down, pivoting on his soles at the same time. It was as he faced the two priests now that he realized that the horizontal beam to which his wrists had been bound made a perfectly good weapon—the more so, since it was firmly entrenched in the palms of both of his hands.

He feinted toward the priest on his left, but the hobbling creatures didn't seem to notice, thus Cam followed through on the action which

had begun as a poking movement one might make with a spear. The end of the beam was not, of course, sharp, but the priest didn't seem to notice that either as the blunt end of the wood caught him square in the sagging mouth. He staggered backward enough steps so that Cam could divert his attention to the second priest coming at him.

This one was a bit more gruesome looking than the others he had seen so far. The right half of his face seemed to be eaten away. Where the right eye should have been there was what looked to be an overgrown patch of yellow flesh. Cam's first impressions, however, were all he had time for. In any case, after the roundhouse swing of the beam splashed into the left hand side of the advancing face, that side looked just as bad as the other. Or at least Cam thought so. It was hard to tell, since the force of the blow severed the head from the shoulders which had supported it. All, of course, with the appropriate amount of foul colored fluid.

By now the clumping footfalls were no longer on the stairwell but on the tiles of the roof proper. The stone man seemed to be taking his time, which was all to the good, since Cam's attention now was diverted to the first priest who was renewing his attack though his shattered lower face was oozing wetness.

The renewed attack lasted all of three fast steps forward on the part of the priest and one step plus a crescent kick on the part of Cam. The knife edge of his right foot made mush of the attacker's cranium. As he went down for the last time to the far side of the roofwall, Cam straightened and turned toward the shuffling stone man.

All right. The fun and games were over, here came problem time.

Question: how do you defeat an opponent with strength far superior to your own?

Answer: you use his strength against himself. Any novice in the martial arts knows that.

Right—and when the opponent has an outer surface like the side of a small mountain, what then?

Ah, then! Then you count your blessings. He could, you know, be much more like a *large* mountain!

Enough philosophy. The time had come for action.

Well said, but specifically what action? The stone man was getting closer, and although his movements were slow he was keeping himself directly between Cam and the stairwell. Operation Evasion, which had suggested itself as an appropriate strategy, didn't seem operable.

But why not give it a try anyway? It was, after all, the healthiest of the alternatives which *did* suggest themselves. In any case, he had to do something.

As to that, somebody else agreed precisely: *Mr. Sanchez—there is a sense of urgency you seem to lack. Jennifer—*

But Cam needed no more. He feinted to the left with a quick move, then darted to his right.

The stone man took a slow step backward and pivoted neatly to block Cam's progress. As he did so, Cam cocked back his right arm and snapped it forward. As the wooden beam cracked into the creased face of rock, Cam hurled himself forward. He exhaled with relief as he realized he had got-

ten past the blocker. It was as he was inhaling that a sledgehammer fist caught him in the small of his back.

Cam's feet both literally left the surface of the roof. It was only his swift reflexes which brought up the palms of his hands in time to save his face from a bloody collision with the roofwall. Even so, he realized he was stunned, that his timing was off. He realized that he had lost several precious seconds when he turned around to face the thing he fought—

And found the face of the thing no farther than three feet from his own!

What's more, the fist of stone was in flight—and on a demolition course.

Again, thanks only to quick reflexes, the fist missed its primary target. It did, however, take out a good portion of the stucco wall. Cam's hands and feet were cocked and ready to do demolition jobs of their own, but he negated the instinctive counterattack. Instead, he dropped downward into a crouch. If the man of rock did as Cam thought he might—

He did. He bent down after Cam, his legs spread, his hands groping, his balance forward—

"Balance is all," Cam's judo instructor had said years ago. Well, here was a perfect opportunity to see if old adages are worth their weight in rock.

Cam pushed forward and downward, until he felt that his shoulders had passed under the stone man's crotch. Then, gathering his own feet under his weight, Cam rose, putting into the movement every ounce of physical and mental power he could marshal for the task.

There was an instant when he didn't know the

effect of his move, when the universe stopped in a precarious balance. And then it happened. With a shout of triumph, Cam felt the weight lessen from his shoulders, felt his own weight moving backward toward the wall, then there was no burden on his shoulders at all.

He stood and whirled toward the wall, looking down through that deep gap which, moments earlier, a stone fist had caused. He saw and heard the crash in the garden below. Then he cursed.

The fall was mighty as was the weight which had fallen. But the stone man rose. Rose, and lifted its face upward to locate its opponent. It began a movement toward the door of the house.

As it did so, its face was illuminated suddenly. There was a flash of lightning, followed by a thunderous roar in the sky. Then—

It was as if a lightning bolt came from somewhere on the roof, somewhere directly behind Cam—and slashed into the earth in the garden.

And, where the stone man had stood, there was nothing—nothing except a pile of stones and threads of fabric.

“Mr. Sanchez.”

Cam whirled. He had recognized the voice, and now he recognized who had caused the destruction of the man of stone.

“You have done well, Mr. Sanchez,” Count Dracula said. “Unfortunately, there is more to do. Just as unfortunately, what must be done must be done with a measure of haste. Otherwise you and the professor lose your precious Jennifer.”

Cam moved, but as he did he looked into the Count’s eyes. “And you, Count—what do you lose?”

"The same as you," Dracula replied grimly. "Jennifer Harmon—and *the world*."

Herak stood, waiting for Cam as he rushed into the room which had been the master bedroom of the house. With nothing more than a raised right hand, he stopped the Puerto Rican's forward movement—stopped his entire movement so that Cam was little more than an awkwardly poised frozen statue.

Cam's eyes, now the only part of his body he could move, saw that the room was flanked by three creatures, two of them the deformed but insignificant priests, the third the remaining man of stone. But in the circumstances, that one too was insignificant—for he was now in the power of the one in the royal purple tunic.

"You are stupid, all of you," Herak said, his face contorted in rage. "You have interrupted my work here tonight, but the effects of your meddling are minor. Look upon the girl—*look!*"

Cam's eyes moved to the place where Jenny was kneeling—kneeling before a golden bowl filled with blood, kneeling and swaying back and forth as her own eyes seemed glued upon that calm dark pool.

"My message has gone forth from this world, upward and into the heavens, into the dark reaches of blackest space, into those places between the stars which teem with life and its forms unsuspected by even the most knowledgeable of men. Come—come closer to my altar. Perhaps you should see firsthand those things of which I speak. It is, after all, only fair that you should see them with your own eyes—so that they will not be

shocked when a new mind sees out through them. *My* mind, Mr. Sanchez. For I have made a decision concerning yourself and your fine physical body—

“I have decided to make it mine.”

Herak’s gaze took in Cam’s physique. “Yes. The time has passed when I need this bodily shell which I now occupy. But yours—being more imposing in presence, being immense of muscular power—yours will serve me well. As your own spirit departs, however, let it be assured that together—your body and my mind—we shall be a being superior to any the world has ever known.”

He gestured toward the altar. “Come—come and see the wonders of the darkness.”

Cam tried to move, found he could—but only in the direction of Jenny and the small altar before her, only toward the center of the strange symbolic markings on the floor by the window. As his feet took him nearer to the girl, he tested his ability to move his right arm—a preparatory test, to determine whether or not that arm could snake out and take out the man who had established control over the rest of his movements. The test was short. No dice; Herak’s control was complete.

And somewhere, on the roof or on the stairwell, someone else was waiting—waiting because—

It was there on Herak’s chest, embroidered there on the purple tunic. A golden-stitched cross. The simple and effective tool which would keep the hand of Dracula out of the action.

Action?

Herak laughed shortly. “Yes, Mr. Sanchez. I know that he whom you know as Dracula is near.

Near and helpless. Listen—listen to the old ones who will bring him to his doom!”

It was then that a great charge of lightning streaked across the dark sky outside the window. The crash of thunder was long and loud.

“The natural processes hail this night and the forces which rule it. Come—kneel. Gaze into the mirror-bowl—gaze, *and see!*”

Cam knelt, straining his eyes to look closer into Jennifer’s face as he did so. She did not look back, appearing not to notice his presence, seeming not to notice anything other than what was happening on or under the surface of that bowl of blood which—

And then Cam saw. Not all at once, but slowly. Forms and shapes moving as wisps within the dark liquid. Things, ugly things. Faces and limbs changing, ever-shifting, in forms as well as color. And yet there seemed to be an absence of real color, except for the pale greens and disgusting yellows and unholy whites. With a portion of his mind which somehow Herak did not control, Cam tried to blot out the senses coming through to his brain. He was not totally successful—and yet he knew that something important was happening somewhere near, somewhere perhaps in this very room, somewhere behind him. There was a voice, one he knew—knew well, perhaps. But his memory did not seem anymore his own. Rather, he could not focus upon his memory—that which was individually his. Instead, and to his horror, it seemed as if the forms which even now were becoming more clear in the smooth surface before him—it seemed that they were part of his mem-

ory, that he had known them before, that he had always known them . . .

As for whoever it was behind him—and this girl who knelt beside him now—who they were did not matter. Nor did his own identity. *His own identity*—

With that small part of his mind which still remained unfocused, he recalled that he had an identity of his own. That much he knew, but no more than that. And he accepted the fact that he didn't know who he was, accepted it as something rather unimportant. He felt it when his body began to sway side to side upon his knees, in the same rhythm as the girl's movements. He felt it also when the calmness took over his entire mind—no, not all of it, but that part which remained free was minuscule and insignificant. His mental focus was now almost completely given over to the altar and the bowl upon it. He did not shrink back when the figures of wisp began to fade—when they disappeared only to reappear with more solid forms. Or, actually, one form—

That of a globe. A smooth glassy substance, a pulsating, alive thing. Dark itself, it was surrounded by darkness. And as it throbbed, an eerie sound—singing of a kind, or chanting, words formed by mouths, perhaps hundreds or thousands of them. But the song or chant was not of joy or triumph or of any emotion. That was it exactly. No emotion whatsoever came from the song and its singers. It was as if they—no, not *as if*—no, it was actual fact. Those who sang had sung since time immemorial.

It was a forever song, one which had no choice connected with it. Those who sang it now had

sung it always and would sing it always for all time to come. Unless . . .

But the naked man kneeling beside the white-gowned girl could not complete the rest of that thought . . .

Again the lightning crashed throughout the dark sky, illuminating the interior of the master bedroom with a pale whiteness which spoke of imminent death. Herak's face was turned toward the bottom of the stairwell to the roof, his smile directed toward the massive dark figure that stood just inside the room.

"It has been a long time—Master!" Herak said.

Red eyes gleamed from the dark shadows, and within the red were pinpoints of white-hot suns. "And you think, Herak, that you have won?"

"Oh, not yet, *Master*," Herak replied, giving the title the same kind of mocking tone as he had the first time. "Not yet. But look upon those two. Do you not recognize their state? The old ones soon will take their sacrifice."

"They may not find it worthy of them."

Herak's smile widened. "Then, they shall have another offering—one which they may find more acceptable. Yourself, Master. Even should they not accept you, this night is your last upon this earth. I marvel that you should have come, but since you have I welcome you—*Master!*"

"I have not come alone, Herak."

"I know that. This one—Sanchez—he is of little help to you. The old cripple who, I admit, was able to release the young one against my spell, can help you little now. As for Qetura—"

"I am here now, Herak."

He turned. She stood in the doorway to his left. "I welcome you also, my lady," he said. "It is fitting that you and your Master should accept your fates together."

"Is that so?" Ktara asked. "I rather thought it best for me to be here for another reason—to assist in granting you your fate."

Quickly, Herak turned toward the stairwell. *The face of the Master—*

With a deadly low roar the outstretched hands and open fang-lined jaws of the dark one moved forward. Herak took one quick step backward, then he laughed—and stepped forward, his right hand directed toward the open window.

As if in answer, the lightning crashed again. Herak laughed as the golden cross emblazoned upon his chest shone with brilliance. It continued to shine after the flash across the sky had died—and after the thing which had attacked him retreated with a cry of rage to shield its eyes with the long black cape it wore.

"My fate—*mine?*" Herak cried hysterically. "Look to yourself—both of you, look to yourselves! Your end comes—now!"

Another gesture, this one directed to the floor—and springing up with a sound that resembled the universe inhaling—

A strip of fire—pale and green. No, *two* strips—
In the shape of the cross!

The beast at the stairwell huddled against the first five of the stairs which led to the rooftop. The dark woman shielded her own eyes now—not from the cross but from the flames themselves.

"Always a pity," Herak said to Ktara, "always, I felt. A real shortcoming to your powers, my lady

—that your aversion to fire turned your abilities to nothingness.” He laughed. “Come my lady—and you, Master, you too—come and visit Herak with his fate! Come, please. Ah, but you do not accept my hospitality. That is a shame, in that you once were so generous in extending hospitality to myself. You gave me shelter for so long a time—

“For six thousand years you gave me shelter!”

His voice had risen now to the pitch of hysterical rage.

“You consigned me to the hell of suffocation! But you shall know worse, both of you! If the lords of the dark world will it, you shall live with them for an eternity—one in which your essences will flicker from horrible torture to tortures which are worse! And they will want it so—I know that. And I know that you also know what I say to be true. I—Herak—the one who restores the old ones’ powers on this world—I who will rule in their name—I say these things, and I shall make them come true. I—”

He had been mocking both of them, but his attention was more on the trembling of the Black Master than upon the woman. Thus his eyes were not upon the doorway in which she stood. Not that she was a source of concern. Everything in this room was protected with his spell—and she could not hope to break such a spell, not one he had placed.

But now as his head whipped around, he saw someone else in that doorway—down close to the floor—who had no spells of his own but had already once this night broken through one of

Herak's own. And that someone carried with him the implement he had used before!

Flat upon his stomach, the sweat pouring down his forehead and into his smarting eyes, Damien Harmon aimed the big rifle carefully—and fired.

CHAPTER 12

When the four successful rifle shots had released Cam from the cross, Harmon watched the battle which followed, using the sniperscope for a close-up view. When he saw Cam in difficulty with the stone man he checked the magazine of the weapon and began to lift it carefully for further action.

"No," Ktara told him. "We are needed elsewhere."

"But Cam needs help!"

"He will get it. We must hurry to the villa. Time grows very short."

In normal times, Harmon's disability did not weigh heavy upon his spirit, but this night—as Ktara guided his wheelchair across the sand toward the house, as he clutched the rifle to his lap while trying to retain an upright position on the chair—he cursed the man whose name was Colly, the man whose metal pipe had put him in the wheelchair for the rest of his days. But Colly had gotten his just reward—just as defined by Damien Harmon, at least—yet Harmon had to live with the effects of the dead man's deeds. Bitter? Yes, Harmon had been bitter, and he was bitter now. His niece was in deadly trouble, his

friends—or, better, his present allies—were hardly able to help, and he . . .

He was a cripple.

“You brood, Professor. We have no time for brooding.”

Ktara was right, of course. Besides, her telekinetic skill was moving the chair along at a fairly regular clip. Harmon nodded. The woman was trying to remain calm, but he could see that she was worried. Each time the lightning flashed in the coal-black sky, each time the roar of thunder crashed through the empty spaces of the desert, she seemed to wince, the quick spasm of her body transferring to his through the medium of the chair she now guided.

“Can Herak be killed?” he asked, knowing she did not miss his gesture with the rifle.

“Not by that, not by . . . any *thing*. No, Professor, Herak is not the target you will seek in that room in which Jenny now waits.”

“Waits?” He did not like the word nor the way Ktara intoned it. But, also, he did not ask for any further explanation. He asked only about the target.

She told him. “That is the key. I cannot touch it, and the Master may not be able to get close enough. Therefore, you . . .”

Therefore, him.

Fair enough, if he got the chance.

There was more lightning. In one of the flashes, Harmon saw the end of the rock-man—or what he thought was the end. He saw only Cam’s pitching the creature from the roof and not the finish which took place within the garden walls. Then more lightning, brighter than before.

"We must hurry," Ktara said softly.

Harmon could not but agree.

As they reached the stairs going up through the interior of the house she gasped—and left him at a run. He called to her, but she didn't turn back. He'd have to make it on his own.

It was a grueling climb, trying to keep the rifle from sliding back down the stairs, but Harmon was equal to the task. When he reached the second floor landing, he was winded and sweat soaked through his clothing. A cold sweat, caused by fear and anxiety as well as physical exertion.

But at last he made the doorway in which Ktara stood. She seemed transfixed, unaware of his presence, as if she were deliberately ignoring his existence. It was not that she had more important things to concern herself with—no, it was more than that. It seemed that she was actively excluding him from her thoughts—

Of course!

That was precisely what she was doing! Herak had her powers, he too could read thoughts. If, then, the thoughts of Harmon entered Ktara's mind, Herak too would know of what was to come. As for Harmon himself—

The steel plate which effectively blocked Ktara's knowing his thoughts would work the same way on Herak. She had taught him her powers—those he had, but no more than those.

Silently, then, he edged closer to the open doorway, scarcely daring to breathe. As he came parallel to the opening, he pivoted slowly around on chest and elbows, the weapon already raised for action. In a glance, he saw the situation.

Jenny and Cam . . . the cross of fire on the floor . . . the huddled figure on the stairwell . . . the taunting figure of Herak . . . and the target.

It was there between where Jenny and Cam knelt swaying. The golden bowl on the short-legged wooden altar. The only trouble was—

He could not see all of it! Just one edge, that closest to Jenny. Cam, damn him, was blocking all the rest—except when his body swayed to the left, then just a bit more of the thing was in sight. So all right. At least, he would have a bit of help in guiding the bullet which—

And then suddenly the sweat really began to pour from Harmon's forehead—because the stark reality of his situation slammed home to him.

Ktara.

The fire—it would lessen her powers. In addition, she had blocked off all thoughts of himself and what he was about to do. In other words—

He was on his own.

The weapon which he—and she—had used so expertly earlier this night now was in the hands of a shaking old cripple whose marksmanship had never been that much to brag about! He had relied upon Ktara earlier. Now—

He inhaled slowly, calming his inner spirit as best as he could. The intake of air passed through clenched jaws which slackened only slightly in their tension. Then, when his hands and fingers seemed as calm as they would ever get, he began to exhale. Blocking out the figures in the room, blocking out the ravings of the insane-sounding Herak, he exhaled—to a point. Then his breath held firm.

And the index finger of his steady right hand gently squeezed the trigger.

Then the universe turned inside out.

Herak's cry was simultaneous with the report of the big rifle. Swiftly, he extended his right hand toward the prone old man, but just as he did Ktara raised hers. "No!"

The blocking action stopped whatever might have happened next—to Harmon, that is. Even before Ktara had moved, however, Herak had whirled to face the screaming girl who knelt before the altar.

Jenny Harmon was shrieking, her hands cupped over her own ears, her eyes wide with horror. For an instant Harmon thought he had missed his target and instead shot his own niece! But that wasn't so. But neither was it so that his bullet had found its primary mark.

He had missed completely the golden bowl!

Instead, the missile had taken the right edge of the altar from the rest of the structure. The bowl merely was tottering, its movement splashing the liquid within it over the sides, but in no great quantity.

But, evidently, it was enough.

Herak rushed toward the bowl just as Jenny's scream faded. As he reached toward the altar, something grasped his wrist. A firm hand closed around it.

Cam's.

A mighty pull and Herak went down—on the other side of Cam, the side away from the still-rocking, still-spilling bowl of blood.

As Herak sprang to his feet, Cam sprang to his,

only to face the cold stare of the man he'd just toppled.

"I take your mind, strong man—I do it *now!*"

"No, Herak—you do not," Ktara said quietly from across the room.

Perhaps, but a force rushed toward him that caused him to stagger backward—a rush of wind that echoed in his ears. He knew, somehow, that if it remained in his mind long enough he would be no more, not upon this earth!

He would be—

Wherever it was his mind, his spirit had been. Somewhere where devils laughed insanely, where gargoyles flapped their scaly wings, where shrieking mouths dripped ooze, where hideous white shapes—or disgusting non-shapes—bubbled in beds of orange lava, where—

Something snapped, and he shook his head. He was—

Cameron Sanchez.

He'd never thought that the thought of his own name, in his own mind, would sound so beautiful.

Herak was screaming now: "You protect the old man! You protect this one! Now see, Qetura, if you can protect yourself!"

And suddenly, the fire that crossed the floor at its center sprang up to eye level. As it did, he heard Ktara's gasp behind him. He had no need to see her to know what her face looked like now. He had seen it before when flames reached out to her, reached into her mind and self and began the slow process of depleting her physical strength and mental powers. He had no further need for thought himself, because what was readily ap-

parent was that, if anything were going to be done, it had to be done now. *Right now!*

For only an instant, his eyes took in where Jenny now had slumped to the floor and where the dark figure of the Count cringed. Then he leaped across the center of the flames.

The priest feebly tried to escape Cam's grip, but he might have saved the small amount of strength he had. Before he could raise his free hand to attempt to strike the naked giant, he was over the giant's hip and onto the floor. A scream issued from the deformed mouth as the flames in which he'd landed began playing havoc with the substance of his flesh. But the giant still held onto the thin wrist, and even now he was yanking the priest upward.

"For you, Herak—one of your own!" Cam roared. Whipping the flaming priest around so that the screaming face was directed toward Herak's, he planted the sole of his foot into the priest's back—and shoved.

Like a flaming torch the priest half-flew toward Herak. Cam did not for a moment think that he would score a direct hit—that's why, within seconds, a second flaming priest was on the same route—a route that Cam now followed himself.

Lightning crashed furiously around the house, lighting up the villa interior as if it were day, as Herak, slashing his arms wildly, freed himself from the clutches of the second torch Cam had sent him. Raising his hands to fend off Cam's attack, he suddenly realized that the naked giant was not coming straight for him—

Not him—but for the golden bowl! And, worse—he now had it!

Cam roll-dived hip-and-shoulder to a place just to the left of the tottering bowl. As his fingers gripped the gold and some of the blood within slopped over onto the back of his right hand, a kaleidoscope of light exploded in his brain. Behind it came sounds as if tall buildings were toppling, and the cries of millions of souls lost in the holocaust echoed in what was a mournful unholy din. He could not hold onto the bowl—could not!

But he must! Just long enough . . . long enough to . . .

From where he lay in the doorway, Harmon could not hear the sounds Cam was hearing, could not see the eruptions which Cam's brain was experiencing. Thus he could not understand why his assistant was having such difficulty trying to stand. It was as if there were some great weight upon his shoulders, as if rising to where he was now—on one knee—was an act which the very laws of gravity opposed, one which they chose to enforce to the extreme, one which they—

They! That was it, of course. "*Cam!*"

The shout—what caused Harmon to do it, he didn't know. But somehow it helped. Cam seemed to respond to it, to straighten up just a little bit more—

"*Cam!*"

Cam shook his head violently. In the midst of the turmoil in his head, there was a sound he recognized, something which somehow told him he had to get up, to—

To what?

"*Cam!*"

To—yes—yes! With a burst of effort which used

all of the strength he had in his gigantic frame, he rose up to his feet—

And pushed the golden bowl from him.

Straight onto the place where the white flames shot the highest.

Screams . . . wails . . . moans. Lightning . . . thunder . . . the house rocking as if a sudden earthquake or hurricane or tornado or . . .

And then silence. Nothing—

Except for the lone cries of one man.

Herak.

His venom poured forth, but Cam could not understand the language.

What's more, as he pushed himself up from the floor, he didn't care. He had accomplished his task.

Where the arms of fire had crossed there was no longer flame. The cross no longer was a cross.

And then two heavy hands came down upon Cam's shoulders. He turned to face the stone man, raised his hands to protect himself—or he tried to. Somehow, he knew he had no further strength with which to—

A heavy forearm drove him across the room. He slammed into the wall face-first, then slipped down to his knees, directly next to where one of the priests lay burning. The flames were beginning to subside, extinguished by the oozing yellow fluid.

Weakly, Cam turned to face the man of rock he knew was coming.

And he was coming. He came for three slow shuffling steps.

Then, before Cam's eyes, the thing of stone disintegrated.

"It is over, Herak," Count Dracula said. His

finger was still pointing to where the stone man had been.

The Count rose from the stairwell, his face once again that of amused royalty. "Your efforts have been mighty, but you have been brought down. Is it not an indignity to have been brought down by such lowly ones as these humans? You should have killed them while you had the chance. Once again, you acted rashly—without proper thought. Once again, your reward is to be punishment."

"Stop!" Herak warned, but there was a hysterical quality to his voice.

"I need not stop, Herak. Your cross of fire has been extinguished. Your lady Qetura sees to it that you kindle no other to take its place. You are finished here, Herak, your business once more terminated before it brings harm."

"Not quite, Master!" Herak sneered. He moved from the wall where he had been so that the firelight remaining in the room illuminated the ferocity of his face.

It also illuminated the golden cross on his purple tunic.

Dracula's hands covered his eyes.

"You see, Master? Such a simple thing, but one which defeats you, one which names me the victor."

It was Ktara who spoke now. "Only for a moment, Herak—only for a moment. Mr. Sanchez—if you please!"

The thought and the strength to carry it out both came to Cam at once. His movements were quick, too quick for Herak, even though he received the same thought from Ktara's mind as

Cam had received. By the time he acted, however, it was too late to do anything except react.

The leg of the priest pulled completely free from the body to which it had belonged, but that was all to the good. The leg—or the material which surrounded it—still carried the fire Cam had given it. Now, thrusting the flaming torch at Herak, Cam passed the fire on—directly to the front of the purple tunic.

Herak screamed, his hands beat upon his chest, trying to extinguish the flames, his mental powers churning. *The Sanchez one—now to enter him, now to make his body respond to my commands.* But there was still the block that Qetura had set up! The old man, then! No, something else stood in his way—the steel which guarded his brain. The girl—Jennifer. She still lived! Her spirit still remained within her body! If—

But no. There too, Qetura's guard—

He screamed with pain now. The tunic was fully ablaze. Frantically he tore the thing from him. His eyes only briefly looked at the item of clothing as it landed on the floor, then they raised—

To look into the deadly eyes of *him*. Eyes into which he himself, just moments before, had looked with triumph.

"M-master," Herak said.

"Say it correctly and with respect." Again now, those red eyes flashed with white hot suns in their midst. "Say it correctly—and kneel before me."

"Yes, Master." Herak knelt, his body—or that in which he was currently lodged—trembling wildly. "I am, as always, your servant."

Dracula laughed. The laugh was short, then his

voice was like something from the far side of the grave.

"You again have tampered with something that should have been left alone. You have done a serious disservice to this world, Herak, more serious than you know."

"But I accomplished nothing, Master!"

"That is not correct. The minds of Sanchez and the girl—they are open to the readings of Qetura. And, though they know not the import of what they have registered, she knows—as do I. No, Herak, you have *not* accomplished nothing. Once, long ago, you destroyed my chances of eliminating the deadly ones. This time, through your meddling, through your successful contact with those of the dark world, you have altered things. You have brought them closer, you have changed the course upon which that world was moving."

Dracula now loomed over the trembling Herak. "You, false apprentice, have done them a service for which they might well have rewarded you, although I think not. They would deem you to be as insignificant as I do. They would be far less kind in the fate meted out. This, Herak—this is your fate!"

And now it was Herak's hands that tried to block out the sight of a dreaded thing. The thing was a red stoneware beaker, a thing he had cause to know all too well.

"First, however, you inhabit the body of a living human. I shall take that body from you now. Look at me, Herak—*look at me!*"

Herak screamed as the metamorphosis began, as the face of the noble one began that deadly change.

“Silence, apprentice. I do not like unwelcome sounds . . . when I dine.”

Ktara moved to where Jenny was beginning to revive. She looked at Cam. “Help the professor down to his chair. The Master also does not desire company . . .” She shot a pitying look at Herak, whose eyes had a desperately pleading look in them.

“When he dines,” she completed.

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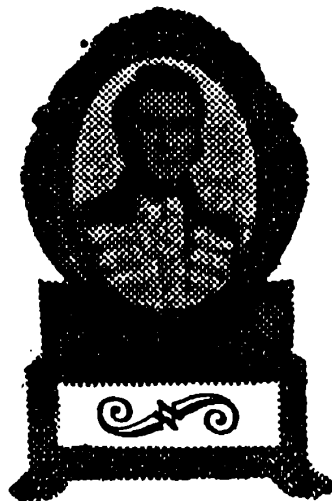


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